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The Writer's Art

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The Writer's Art

BY THOSE WHO HAVE PRACTICED IT

SELECTED AND ARRANGED

BY

ROLLO WALTER BROWN

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. . . Well, we, who have gone further into those troubles, believe that we can help you: true we cannot at once take your troúble from you; nay, we may at first rather add to it; but we can tell you what we think of the way out of it; and then amidst the many things you will have to do to set yourselves and others fairly on that way, you will many days, nay most days, forget your trouble in thinking of the good that lies beyond it, for which you are working. — William Morris.

PREFACE

THE underlying idea of this volume originated several years ago in a period of very pleasant collaboration with Professor N. W. Barnes, now of the University of Chicago. In 1911–12 when we were completing *The Art of Writing English* we decided to publish, as a companion volume to the college textbook, a book of prose readings made up of what writers themselves had said about writing. Before we had brought the material together, however, my own interests drew me to another task, and Professor Barnes was called to a special field where matters of immediate import have ever since claimed his attention. Recently when I turned to the volume to bring it to completion, I found that in certain respects I had departed from our original purpose. I wish, nevertheless, to make grateful acknowledgment of all that Professor Barnes contributed, and to express my appreciation of the eager sympathy with which he has followed the book into its present form.

I wish also to express my thanks to Professor G. L. Kittredge, of Harvard University, Professor F. W. Chandler, of the University of Cincinnati, and Mr. Harold Hawk for valuable suggestions; to Professor F. N. Scott, of the University of Michigan,

for his kindness in tendering me the fruits of his painstaking correction of Lewes's *Principles of Success in Literature;* to a number of publishers, specifically mentioned later, for the privilege of using copyrighted material; to Professor G. B. Woods and Mr. Allen Crafton, of Carleton College, for their aid in the reading of proofs; and finally to my wife for her inspiration and her thoughtful assistance in the preparation of the volume for the printer.

R. W. B.

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INTRODUCTION

Two convictions have prompted the preparation of this volume. The first of these is that beyond the usual college instruction in certain fundamentals of composition, writing cannot profitably be taught by prescribed formula — as though literary excellence resulted from the magic of some complete and closed system of philosophy. The second is that in matters of literary workmanship writers themselves ought to prove stimulating counsellors.

The first of these convictions does not disregard the importance of college courses or of books on the mechanics of writing, on the "forms" of composition, or on certain rather definitely restricted fields, such as that of the short story or the personal essay. But it does regard all such instruction as falling short of its professed aim unless it is supplemented by the liberalizing observations or suggestions of some one whose vision has not been narrowed by the necessities of a special pedagogical problem.

To-day one of the serious dangers in the teaching of composition is the made-to-order recipe for literary genius. The teacher is called upon to name every ingredient; to indicate every proportion; and, worst of all, to classify in a system of air-tight receptacles every "legitimate" variety of spices. The course must be scrupulously complete — so complete that a student who has taken it runs serious risk of feeling that it would be useless or foolish or even dangerous for him either to investigate the literary recipe of any one else or to do any experimenting on his own initiative.

The specialized course must undoubtedly continue to form the nucleus of advanced instruction in composition. But it seems reasonable to believe that such a course should be the beginning and not the end of instruction; that if we are to have groups of young writers who shall contribute anything to American letters, they must receive in addition to basic instruction a variety of quickening suggestion, in order that they may always be open-minded and imbued with an undying intellectual curiosity. They should never cease to be inquirers after the way and the nature of truth; and in their search they should not be prejudiced against any method or any aim simply because it is new or because it is old. And if among them appears a brilliant genius who finds it impossible to make his work conform to the usual categories, yet who has something to say that would increase the world's delight and its sense of social kinship, he should be encouraged to go his own way, even if he passed wholly beyond the prescriptions of any given course. Somewhere in the study of their subject, students of writing must come into possession of two essential working-ideas: they must feel that creative labor is not unalterably restricted either in the direction it may take or in the nature of the ends it may attain; and they must see that in literary art, as in other creative employments, very little can really be taught, but very much can be learned.

Concerning the usefulness of writers as counsellors, it has customarily been said that men and women who have devoted their lives to the writing of novels and essays and poetry have not gone to the

trouble of discussing their own art. Some critics, with a sense of humor that leads them to sacrifice a large body of truth for a choice morsel of irony, have observed that writers have left the teaching of composition to college professors who cannot write. They usually "prove" their case by quoting an ungrammatical sentence or two from the public utterance of some teacher, and by pointing out the supposed fact that Edgar Allan Poe was the only writer who ever said much about his methods of working, and that he probably did not tell the truth. Now it is unimportant that one should here discuss the considerable amount of creative writing done each year by teachers; but it is extremely important that we should bear in mind the great freedom with which creative writers have discussed the writer's problems. The very men and women who have enriched our lives with novels and essays and poems have been conscious of the learner's difficulties, and have written about them — from the most baffling problem of artistic structure down to the humblest question of punctuation.

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that we have not made use of "expert counsel" in the teaching of English as has been done in the teaching of other kinds of constructive or artistic work. The engineer devotes some part of his time to the promotion of engineering education; the architect contributes to the study of architecture either through lectures or through writing; the musician — the composer as well as the performer — is almost certain to have a few pupils; and the sculptor or painter who does not teach, or who has not taught at some time in his life,

is rare indeed. Compared with workers in these fields, the literary craftsman contributes very little directly to the promotion of his art.

For this discrepancy, institutions of learning are chiefly to blame. Very few colleges or universities encourage teachers to improve their teaching by becoming creative writers. Nor do they encourage writers — good writers — to give a small part of their time to teaching. Authors, many administrators of education inform us, are not competent to teach. To begin with, they have an "artistic temperament"; they are likely to be "unpractical" and visionary; and they are wholly without formal training in pedagogy. Granted that all of these objections are sound, does it not remain true that the writer as a teacher would have a powerful influence for better literary art? What student would not be quickened if in his college career he could have just one theme read and marked by Hazlitt or Thackeray or R. L. S.? Who would not work a little harder and a little longer because he had once taken a course in composition under Flaubert or Ruskin or Joseph Conrad? Would it really matter very much whether the teacher in this case had had an "artistic temperament" or not, or whether his course was organized according to the recommendations of the latest efficiency expert? Such a privilege, granted to the young engineer, the young composer or performer, the young sculptor, and the young painter, yet denied almost wholly to the young writer, would be welcomed by every serious student of composition. And it would be welcomed just as heartily by the "full-time" teacher who can give only an oc-

casional hour to writing. The obstacle to fulfillment lies in the fact that institutions of learning have not recognized the importance of the need.

As a small fund of available material contributed to the world by writers themselves, this volume is submitted to teachers and students of composition. It is not a source-book of historical information on style or criticism — excellent books of that kind have already been compiled by Professor Saintsbury, Professor Lane Cooper, and Professor W. T. Brewster — but a selected group of essays that students in one college and two universities have found helpful in their efforts to learn to write. Editorial footnotes have been rigorously compressed or excluded; no effort has been made to supply information for the student who is too indifferent to turn the pages of a lexicon or a biographical dictionary. The editor has sought to give only such information as would enable the serious student to read intelligently were he to come upon one of the essays in the magazine or the book in which it first appeared. The author's view, unclouded by any critical thesis or extended commentary of an editor, has been regarded as the matter of importance.

I. PRELIMINARIES

TRUTH OF INTERCOURSE [1]

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

1850–1894

"Truth of Intercourse" appeared originally in *The Cornhill Magazine*, May, 1879. In 1881 it was included in *Virginibus Puerisque* as the fourth essay in that volume.

Stevenson's reflections on the art of writing are important, not only because of his wide experience in the field of letters, but also because he has told us that in his efforts to perfect his craft he struggled laboriously. See, for example, his essay entitled "A College Magazine."

AMONG sayings that have a currency in spite of being wholly false upon the face of them for the sake of a half-truth upon another subject which is accidentally combined with the error, one of the grossest and broadest conveys the monstrous proposition that it is easy to tell the truth and hard to tell a lie. I wish heartily it were. But the truth is one; it has first to be discovered, then justly and exactly uttered. Even with instruments specially contrived for such a purpose — with a foot rule, a level, or a theodolite — it is not easy to be exact; it is easier, alas! to be inexact. From those who mark the divisions on a scale to those who measure the boundaries of empires or the distance of the heavenly stars, it is by careful method and minute, unwearying attention that men rise even to material exactness or to sure knowledge even of external and constant things. But it is easier to draw the outline of a mountain than the changing appearance of a face; and truth in human

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relations is of this more intangible and dubious order: hard to seize, harder to communicate. Veracity to facts in a loose, colloquial sense — not to say that I have been in Malabar when as a matter of fact I was never out of England, not to say that I have read Cervantes in the original when as a matter of fact I know not one syllable of Spanish — this, indeed, is easy and to the same degree unimportant in itself. Lies of this sort, according to circumstances, may or may not be important; in a certain sense even they may or may not be false. The habitual liar may be a very honest fellow, and live truly with his wife and friends; while another man who never told a formal falsehood in his life may yet be himself one lie — heart and face, from top to bottom. This is the kind of lie which poisons intimacy. And, *vice versa*, veracity to sentiment, truth in a relation, truth to your own heart and your friends, never to feign or falsify emotion — that is the truth which makes love possible and mankind happy.

L'art de bien dire is but a drawing-room accomplishment unless it be pressed into the service of the truth. The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish. This is commonly understood in the case of books or set orations; even in making your will, or writing an explicit letter, some difficulty is admitted by the world. But one thing you can never make Philistine natures understand; one thing, which yet lies on the surface, remains as unseizable to their wits as a high flight of metaphysics — namely, that the business of life is mainly carried on by means of this difficult art of literature, and according to a man's proficiency in that art shall be the freedom and the fulness

of his intercourse with other men. Anybody, it is supposed, can say what he means; and, in spite of their notorious experience to the contrary, people so continue to suppose. Now, I simply open the last book I have been reading — Mr. Leland's captivating *English Gipsies*. "It is said," I find on p. 7, "that those who can converse with Irish peasants in their own native tongue form far higher opinions of their appreciation of the beautiful, and of *the elements of humour and pathos in their hearts*, than do those who know their thoughts only through the medium of English. I know from my own observations that this is quite the case with the Indians of North America, and it is unquestionably so with the gipsy." In short, where a man has not a full possession of the language, the most important, because the most amiable, qualities of his nature have to lie buried and fallow; for the pleasure of comradeship, and the intellectual part of love, rest upon these very "elements of humour and pathos." Here is a man opulent in both, and for lack of a medium he can put none of it out to interest in the market of affection! But what is thus made plain to our apprehensions in the case of a foreign language is partially true even with the tongue we learned in childhood. Indeed, we all speak different dialects; one shall be copious and exact, another loose and meagre; but the speech of the ideal talker shall correspond and fit upon the truth of fact — not clumsily, obscuring lineaments, like a mantle, but cleanly adhering, like an athlete's skin. And what is the result ? That the one can open himself more clearly to his friends, and can enjoy more of what makes life truly valuable — intimacy with those he loves. An orator makes a false step; he employs some trivial, some absurd, some vulgar

phrase; in the turn of a sentence he insults, by a side wind, those whom he is labouring to charm; in speaking to one sentiment he unconsciously ruffles another in parenthesis; and you are not surprised, for you know his task to be delicate and filled with perils. "O frivolous mind of man, light ignorance!" As if yourself, when you seek to explain some misunderstanding or excuse some apparent fault, speaking swiftly and addressing a mind still recently incensed, were not harnessing for a more perilous adventure; as if yourself required less tact and eloquence; as if an angry friend or a suspicious lover were not more easy to offend than a meeting of indifferent politicians! Nay, and the orator treads in a beaten round; the matters he discusses have been discussed a thousand times before; language is ready-shaped to his purpose; he speaks out of a cut and dry vocabulary. But you — may it not be that your defence reposes on some subtlety of feeling, not so much as touched upon in Shakespeare, to express which, like a pioneer, you must venture forth into zones of thought still unsurveyed, and become yourself a literary innovator ? For even in love there are unlovely humours; ambiguous acts, unpardonable words, may yet have sprung from a kind sentiment. If the injured one could read your heart, you may be sure that he would understand and pardon; but, alas! the heart cannot be shown — it has to be demonstrated in words. Do you think it is a hard thing to write poetry ? Why, that is to write poetry, and of a high, if not the highest, order.

I should even more admire "the lifelong and heroic literary labours" of my fellow-men, patiently clearing up in words their loves and their contentions, and speaking their autobiography daily to their wives, were it not

for a circumstance which lessens their difficulty and my admiration by equal parts. For life, though largely, is not entirely carried on by literature. We are subject to physical passions and contortions; the voice breaks and changes, and speaks by unconscious and winning inflections, we have legible countenances, like an open book; things that cannot be said look eloquently through the eyes; and the soul, not locked into the body as a dungeon, dwells ever on the threshold with appealing signals. Groans and tears, looks and gestures, a flush or a paleness, are often the most clear reporters of the heart, and speak more directly to the hearts of others. The message flies by these interpreters in the least space of time, and the misunderstanding is averted in the moment of its birth. To explain in words takes time and a just and patient hearing; and in the critical epochs of a close relation, patience and justice are not qualities on which we can rely. But the look or the gesture explains things in a breath; they tell their message without ambiguity; unlike speech, they cannot stumble, by the way, on a reproach or an illusion that should steel your friend against the truth; and then they have a higher authority, for they are the direct expression of the heart, not yet transmitted through the unfaithful and sophisticating brain. Not long ago I wrote a letter to a friend which came near involving us in quarrel; but we met, and in personal talk I repeated the worst of what I had written, and added worse to that; and with the commentary of the body it seemed not unfriendly either to hear or say. Indeed, letters are in vain for the purposes of intimacy; an absence is a dead break in the relation; yet two who know each other fully and are bent on perpetuity in love, may so preserve the attitude

of their affections that they may meet on the same terms as they had parted.

Pitiful is the case of the blind, who cannot read the face; pitiful that of the deaf, who cannot follow the changes of the voice. And there are others also to be pitied; for there are some of an inert, uneloquent nature, who have been denied all the symbols of communication, who have neither a lively play of facial expression, nor speaking gestures, nor a responsive voice, nor yet the gift of frank, explanatory speech: people truly made of clay, peopled tied for life into a bag which no one can undo. They are poorer than the gipsy, for their heart can speak no language under heaven. Such people we must learn slowly by the tenor of their acts, or through yea and nay communications; or we take them on trust on the strength of a general air, and now and again, when we see the spirit breaking through in a flash, correct or change our estimate. But these will be uphill intimacies, without charm or freedom, to the end; and freedom is the chief ingredient in confidence. Some minds, romantically dull, despise physical endowments. That is a doctrine for a misanthrope; to those who like their fellow-creatures it must always be meaningless; and, for my part, I can see few things more desirable, after the possession of such radical qualities as honour and humour and pathos, than to have a lively and not a stolid countenance; to have looks to correspond with every feeling; to be elegant and delightful in person, so that we shall please even in the intervals of active pleasing, and may never discredit speech with uncouth manners or become unconsciously our own burlesques. But of all unfortunates there is one creature (for I will not call him man) conspicuous in misfortune. This is he

who has forfeited his birthright of expression, who has cultivated artful intonations, who has taught his face tricks, like a pet monkey, and on every side perverted or cut off his means of communication with his fellow-men. The body is a house of many windows: there we all sit, showing ourselves and crying on the passers-by to come and love us. But this fellow has filled his windows with opaque glass, elegantly coloured. His house may be admired for its design, the crowd may pause before the stained windows, but meanwhile the poor proprietor must lie languishing within, uncomforted, unchangeably alone.

Truth of intercourse is something more difficult than to refrain from open lies. It is possible to avoid falsehood and yet not tell the truth. It is not enough to answer formal questions. To reach the truth by yea and nay communications implies a questioner with a share of inspiration, such as is often found in mutual love. *Yea* and *nay* mean nothing; the meaning must have been related in the question. Many words are often necessary to convey a very simple statement; for in this sort of exercise we never hit the gold; the most that we can hope is by many arrows, more or less far off on different sides, to indicate, in the course of time, for what target we are aiming, and after an hour's talk, back and forward, to convey the purport of a single principle or a single thought. And yet while the curt, pithy speaker misses the point entirely, a wordy, prolegomenous babbler will often add three new offences in the process of excusing one. It is really a most delicate affair. The world was made before the English language, and seemingly upon a different design. Suppose we held our converse not in words, but in music; those who have a

bad ear would find themselves cut off from all near commerce, and no better than foreigners in this big world. But we do not consider how many have "a bad ear" for words, nor how often the most eloquent find nothing to reply. I hate questioners and questions; there are so few that can be spoken to without a lie. "*Do you forgive me?*" Madam and sweetheart, so far as I have gone in life I have never yet been able to discover what forgiveness means. "*Is it still the same between us?*" Why, how can it be? It is eternally different; and yet you are still the friend of my heart. "*Do you understand me?*" God knows; I should think it highly improbable.

The cruellest lies are often told in silence. A man may have sat in a room for hours and not opened his teeth, and yet come out of that room a disloyal friend or a vile calumniator. And how many loves have perished because, from pride, or spite, or diffidence, or that unmanly shame which withholds a man from daring to betray emotion, a lover, at the critical point of the relation, has but hung his head and held his tongue? And, again, a lie may be told by a truth, or a truth conveyed through a lie. Truth to facts is not always truth to sentiment; and part of the truth, as often happens in answer to a question, may be the foulest calumny. A fact may be an exception; but the feeling is the law, and it is that which you must neither garble nor belie. The whole tenor of a conversation is a part of the meaning of each separate statement; the beginning and the end define and travesty the intermediate conversation. You never speak to God; you address a fellow-man, full of his own tempers; and to tell truth, rightly understood, is not to state the true facts, but to convey a true impression; truth in spirit, not truth to letter, is the true

veracity. To reconcile averted friends a Jesuitical discretion is often needful, not so much to gain a kind hearing as to communicate sober truth. Women have an ill name in this connection; yet they live in as true relations; the lie of a good woman is the true index of her heart.

"It takes," says Thoreau, in the noblest and most useful passage I remember to have read in any modern author,[1] "two to speak truth — one to speak and another to hear." He must be very little experienced, or have no great zeal for truth, who does not recognise the fact. A grain of anger or a grain of suspicion produces strange acoustical effects, and makes the ear greedy to remark offence. Hence we find those who have once quarrelled carry themselves distantly, and are ever ready to break the truce. To speak truth there must be moral equality or else no respect; and hence between parent and child intercourse is apt to degenerate into a verbal fencing bout, and misapprehensions to become ingrained. And there is another side to this, for the parent begins with an imperfect notion of the child's character, formed in early years or during the equinoctial gales of youth; to this he adheres, noting only the facts which suit with his preconception; and wherever a person fancies himself unjustly judged, he at once and finally gives up the effort to speak truth. With our chosen friends, on the other hand, and still more between lovers (for mutual understanding is love's essence), the truth is easily indicated by the one and aptly comprehended by the other. A hint taken, a look understood, conveys the gist of long and delicate explana-

[1] *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Wednesday; p. 283.

tions; and where the life is known even *yea* and *nay* become luminous. In the closest of all relations — that of a love well founded and equally shared — speech is half discarded, like a roundabout, infantile process or a ceremony of formal etiquette; and the two communicate directly by their presences, and with few looks and fewer words contrive to share their good and evil and uphold each other's hearts in joy. For love rests upon a physical basis; it is a familiarity of nature's making and apart from voluntary choice. Understanding has in some sort outrun knowledge, for the affection perhaps began with the acquaintance; and as it was not made like other relations, so it is not, like them, to be perturbed or clouded. Each knows more than can be uttered; each lives by faith, and believes by a natural compulsion; and between man and wife the language of the body is largely developed and grown strangely eloquent. The thought that prompted and was conveyed in a caress would only lose to be set down in words — ay, although Shakespeare himself should be the scribe.

Yet it is in these dear intimacies, beyond all others, that we must strive and do battle for the truth. Let but a doubt arise, and alas! all the previous intimacy and confidence is but another charge against the person doubted. "*What a monstrous dishonesty is this if I have been deceived so long and so completely!*" Let but that thought gain entrance, and you plead before a deaf tribunal. Appeal to the past; why, that is your crime! Make all clear, convince the reason; alas! speciousness is but a proof against you. "*If you can abuse me now, the more likely that you have abused me from the first.*"

For a strong affection such moments are worth supporting, and they will end well; for your advocate is in

your lover's heart, and speaks her own language; it is not you but she herself who can defend and clear you of the charge. But in slighter intimacies, and for a less stringent union? Indeed, is it worth while? We are all *incompris*, only more or less concerned for the mischance; all trying wrongly to do right; all fawning at each other's feet like dumb, neglected lap-dogs. Sometimes we catch an eye — this is our opportunity in the ages — and we wag our tail with a poor smile. "*Is that all?*" All? If you only knew! But how can they know? They do not love us; the more fools we to squander life on the indifferent.

But the morality of the thing, you will be glad to hear, is excellent; for it is only by trying to understand others that we can get our own hearts understood; and in matters of human feeling the clement judge is the most successful pleader.

ON THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WRITING AND SPEAKING

WILLIAM HAZLITT
1778–1830

In *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, edited by Waller and Glover (J. M. Dent and Company, 1903), the following bibliographical note appears concerning the volume from which "On the Difference Between Writing and Speaking" is taken: "*The Plain Speaker: Opinions on Books, Men, and Things*, appeared anonymously in 1826 in two volumes (9× 5½ inches), published by Henry Colburn, New Burlington Street," etc., etc.

Until recently students of composition have had little opportunity to become acquainted with Hazlitt; but thanks to the appearance of several collections of essays from his works, it is now possible to have on one's book-shelves some of the best essays that he has written. Anyone who wishes to become an effective writer can afford to spend frequent hours in the buoyant atmosphere of Hazlitt's pages. His work is all the more interesting because of the long struggle that he himself made to attain adequate expression. "If such is still my admiration for this man's [Burke's] misapplied powers, what must it have been when I myself was in vain trying, year after year, to write a single essay, nay, a single page or sentence; when I regarded the wonders of his pen with the longing eyes of one who was dumb and a changeling; and when to convey the slightest conception of my meaning to others in words was the height of an almost hopeless ambition."

"Some minds are proportioned to that which may be dispatched at once, or within a short return of time: others to that which begins afar off, and is to be won with length of pursuit." — Bacon.

IT is a common observation, that few persons can be found who speak and write equally well. Not only is it obvious that the two faculties do not always go to-

gether in the same proportions: but they are not unusually in direct opposition to each other. We find that the greatest authors often make the worst company in the world; and again, some of the liveliest fellows imaginable in conversation or extempore speaking, seem to lose all their vivacity and spirit the moment they set pen to paper. For this a greater degree of quickness or slowness of parts, education, habit, temper, turn of mind, and a variety of collateral and predisposing causes are necessary to account. The subject is at least curious, and worthy of an attempt to explain it. I shall endeavour to illustrate the difference by familiar examples rather than by analytical reasonings. The philosopher of old was not unwise who defined motion by getting up and walking.

The great leading distinction between writing and speaking is, that more time is allowed for the one than the other; and hence different faculties are required for, and different objects attained by, each. He is properly the best speaker who can collect together the greatest number of opposite ideas at a moment's warning: he is properly the best writer who can give utterance to the greatest quantity of valuable knowledge in the course of his whole life. The chief requisite for the one, then, appears to be quickness and facility of perception — for the other, patience of soul, and a power increasing with the difficulties it has to master. He cannot be denied to be an expert speaker, a lively companion, who is never at a loss for something to say on every occasion or subject that offers: he, by the same rule, will make a respectable writer, who, by dint of study, can find out anything good to say upon any one point that has not been touched upon before, or who by asking for time,

can give the most complete and comprehensive view of any question. The one must be done off-hand, at a single blow: the other can only be done by a repetition of blows, by having time to think and do better. In speaking, less is required of you, if you only do it at once with grace and spirit: in writing, you stipulate for all that you are capable of, but you have the choice of your own time and subject. You do not expect from the manufacturer the same despatch in executing an order that you do from a shopman or warehouseman. The difference of *quicker* and *slower*, however, is not all: that is merely a difference of comparison in doing the same thing. But the writer and speaker have to do things essentially different. Besides habit, and greater or less facility, there is also a certain reach of capacity, a certain depth or shallowness, grossness or refinement of intellect, which marks out the distinction between those whose chief ambition is to shine by producing an immediate effect, or who are thrown back, by a natural bias, on the severer researches of thought and study.

We see persons of that standard or texture of mind that they can do nothing, but on the spur of the occasion: if they have time to deliberate, they are lost. There are others who have no resource, who cannot advance a step by any efforts or assistance, beyond a successful arrangement of commonplaces: but these they have always at command, at everybody's service. There is F[letcher] — meet him where you will in the street, he has his topic ready to discharge in the same breath with the customary forms of salutations; he is hand and glove with it; on it goes and off, and he manages it like Wart his caliver.

Hear him but reason in divinity,
And, all-admiring, with an inward wish
You would desire the King were made a prelate;
Hear him debate of Commonwealth affairs,
You would say it hath been all in all his study;
Turn him to any cause of policy,
The Gordian knot of it he will unloose,
Familiar as his garter; that when he speaks,
The air, a charter'd libertine, is still —
[*King Henry V*, 1. i. 38 ff.]

but, ere you have time to answer him, he is off like a shot, to repeat the same rounded, fluent observations to others: — a perfect master of the sentences, a walking polemic wound up for the day, a smartly bound political pocketbook! Set the same person to write a common paragraph, and he cannot get through it for very weariness: ask him a question, ever so little out of the common road, and he stares you in the face. What does all this bustle, animation, plausibility, and command of words amount to ? A lively flow of animal spirits, a good deal of confidence, a communicative turn, and a tolerably tenacious memory with respect to floating opinions and current phrases. Beyond the routine of the daily newspapers and coffee-house criticism, such persons do not venture to think at all: or if they did, it would be so much the worse for them, for they would only be perplexed in the attempt, and would perform their part in the mechanism of society with so much the less alacrity and easy volubility.

The most dashing orator I ever heard is the flattest writer I ever read. In speaking, he was like a volcano vomiting out *lava;* in writing, he is like a volcano burnt out. Nothing but the dry cinders, the hard shell remains. The tongues of flame, with which, in haranguing

a mixed assembly, he used to illuminate his subject, and almost scorched up the panting air, do not appear painted on the margin of his works. He was the model of a flashy, powerful demagogue — a madman blest with a fit audience. He was possessed, infuriated with the patriotic *mania;* he seemed to rend and tear the rotten carcase of corruption with the remorseless, indecent rage of a wild beast: he mourned over the bleeding body of his country, like another Antony over the dead body of Cæsar, as if he would "move the very stones of Rome to rise and mutiny": he pointed to the "Persian abodes, the glittering temples" of oppression and luxury, with prophetic exultation; and like another Helen, had almost fired another Troy! The lightning of national indignation flashed from his eye; the workings of the popular mind were seen labouring in his bosom: it writhed and swelled with its rank "fraught of aspics' tongues," and the poison frothed over at his lips. Thus qualified, he "wielded at will the fierce democracy, and fulmin'd over" an area of souls, of no mean circumference. He who might be said to have "roared you in the ears of the groundlings an 'twere any lion, aggravates his voice" on paper, "like any sucking-dove." It is not merely that the same individual cannot sit down quietly in his closet, and produce the same, or a correspondent effect — that what he delivers over to the compositor is tame and trite and tedious — that he cannot by any means, as it were, "create a soul under the ribs of death" — but sit down yourself, and read one of these very popular and electrical effusions (for they have been published), and you would not believe it to be the same! The thunder-and-lightning mixture of the orator turns out a mere drab-coloured suit in the

person of the prose-writer. We wonder at the change, and think there must be some mistake, some legerdemain trick played off upon us, by which what before appeared so fine now appears to be so worthless. The deception took place *before;* now it is removed. "Bottom! thou art translated!" might be placed as a motto under most collections of printed speeches that I have had the good fortune to meet with, whether originally addressed to the people, the senate, or the bar. Burke's and Windham's form an exception: Mr. Coleridge's *Conciones ad Populum* do not, any more than Mr. Thelwall's *Tribune*. What we read is the same: what we hear and see is different — "the selfsame words, but *not* to the selfsame tune." The orator's vehemence of gesture, the loudness of the voice, the speaking eye, the conscious attitude, the inexplicable dumb show and noise, — all "those brave sublunary things that made his raptures clear," — are no longer there, and without these he is nothing; — his "fire and air" turn to puddle and ditch-water, and the god of eloquence and of our idolatry sinks into a common mortal, or an image of lead, with a few labels, nicknames, and party watchwords stuck in his mouth. The truth is, that these always made up the stock of his intellectual wealth; but a certain exaggeration and extravagance of *manner* covered the nakedness and swelled out the emptiness of the *matter:* the sympathy of angry multitudes with an impassioned theatrical declaimer supplied the place of argument or wit; while the physical animation and ardour of the speaker evaporated in "sound and fury, signifying nothing," and leaving no trace behind it. A popular speaker (such as I have been here describing) is like a vulgar actor off the stage — take away his cue,

and he has nothing to say for himself. Or he is so accustomed to the intoxication of popular applause, that without that stimulus he has no motive or power of exertion left — neither imagination, understanding, liveliness, common sense, words, or ideas — he is fairly cleared out; and in the intervals of sober reason, is the dullest and most imbecile of all mortals.

An orator can hardly get beyond *commonplaces:* if he does, he gets beyond his hearers. The most successful speakers, even in the House of Commons, have not been the best scholars or the finest writers — neither those who took the most profound views of their subject, nor who adorned it with the most original fancy, or the richest combinations of language. Those speeches that in general told the best at the time, are not now readable. What were the materials of which they were chiefly composed ? An imposing detail of passing events, a formal display of official documents, an appeal to established maxims, an echo of popular clamour, some worn-out metaphor newly vamped up, — some hackneyed argument used for the hundredth, nay thousandth time, to fall in with the interests, the passions, or prejudices of listening and devoted admirers; — some truth or falsehood, repeated as the Shibboleth of party time out of mind, which gathers strength from sympathy as it spreads, because it is understood or assented to by the million, and finds, in the increased action of the minds of numbers, the weight and force of an instinct. A COMMONPLACE does not leave the mind "sceptical, puzzled, and undecided in the moment of action": — "it gives a body to opinion, and a permanence to fugitive belief." It operates mechanically, and opens an instantaneous and infallible communica-

tion between the hearer and speaker. A set of cant phrases, arranged in sounding sentences, and pronounced "with good emphasis and discretion," keep the gross and irritable humours of an audience in constant fermentation; and levy no tax on the understanding. To give a reason for anything is to breed a doubt of it, which doubt you may not remove in the sequel; either because your reason may not be a good one, or because the person to whom it is addressed may not be able to comprehend it, or because *others* may not be able to comprehend it. He who offers to go into the grounds of an acknowledged axiom, risks the unanimity of the company "by most admired disorder," as he who digs to the foundation of a building to show its solidity, risks its falling. But a commonplace is enshrined in its own unquestioned evidence, and constitutes its own immortal basis. Nature, it has been said, abhors a *vacuum;* and the House of Commons, it might be said, hates everything but a commonplace! Mr. Burke did not often shock the prejudices of the House: he endeavoured to *account for them*, to "lay the flattering unction" of philosophy "to their souls." They could not endure him. Yet he did not attempt this by dry argument alone; he called to his aid the flowers of poetical fiction, and strewed the most dazzling colours of language over the Standing Orders of the House. It was a double offence to them — an aggravation of the encroachments of his genius. They would rather "hear a cat mew or an axletree grate," than hear a man talk philosophy by the hour —

> Not harsh and crabbed, as dull fools suppose,
> But musical as is Apollo's lute,
> And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,
> Where no crude surfeit reigns. [*Comus*, 477 ff.]

He was emphatically called the *Dinner-Bell*. They went out by shoals when he began to speak. They coughed and shuffled him down. While he was uttering some of the finest observations (to speak in compass) that ever were delivered in that House, they walked out, not as the beasts came out of the ark, by twos and by threes, but in droves and companies of tens, of dozens, and scores! Oh! it is "the heaviest stone which melancholy can throw at a man," when you are in the middle of a delicate speculation to see "a robustious periwig-pated fellow" deliberately take up his hat and walk out. But what effect could Burke's finest observations be expected to have on the House of Commons in their corporate capacity? On the supposition that they were original, refined, comprehensive, his auditors had never heard, and assuredly they had never thought of them before: how then should they know that they were good or bad, till they had time to consider better of it, or till they were told what to think? In the meantime, their effect would be to stop the question: they were blanks in the debate: they could at best only be laid aside and left *ad referendum*. What does it signify if four or five persons, at the utmost, felt their full force and fascinating power the instant they were delivered? They would be utterly unintelligible to nine-tenths of the persons present, and their impression upon any particular individual, more knowing than the rest, would be involuntarily paralysed by the torpedo touch of the elbow of a country gentleman or city orator. There is a reaction in insensibility as well as in enthusiasm; and men in society judge not by their own convictions, but by sympathy with others. In reading, we may go over the page again, whenever anything new or questionable

"gives us pause": besides we are by ourselves, and it is *a word to the wise*. We are not afraid of understanding too much, and being called upon to unriddle. In hearing, we are (saving the mark!) in the company of fools; and time presses. Was the debate to be suspended while Mr. Fox or Mr. Windham took this or that Honourable Member aside, to explain to them *that fine observation* of Mr. Burke's, and to watch over the new birth of their understandings, the dawn of this new light! If we were to wait till Noble Lords and Honourable Gentlemen were inspired with a relish for abstruse thinking, and a taste for the loftier flights of fancy, the business of this great nation would shortly be at a stand. No: it is too much to ask that our good things should be duly appreciated by the first person we meet, or in the next minute after their disclosure; if the world are a little, a very little, the wiser or better for them a century hence, it is full as much as can be modestly expected! The impression of anything delivered in a large assembly must be comparatively null and void, unless you not only understand and feel its value yourself, but are conscious that it is felt and understood by the meanest capacity present. Till that is the case, the speaker is in your power, not you in his. The eloquence that is effectual and irresistible must stir the inert mass of prejudice, and pierce the opaquest shadows of ignorance. Corporate bodies move slow in the progress of intellect, for this reason, that they must keep back, like convoys, for the heaviest sailing vessels under their charge. The sinews of the wisest councils are, after all, impudence and interest: the most enlightened bodies are often but slaves of the weakest intellects they reckon among them, and the best intentioned are but tools of the greatest hypocrites and knaves. . . .

A set of oratorical flourishes, indeed, is soon exhausted, and is generally all that the extempore speaker can safely aspire to. Not so with the resources of art or nature, which are inexhaustible, and which the writer has time to seek out, to embody, and to fit into shape and use, if he has the strength, the courage, and patience to do so.

There is then a certain range of thought and expression beyond the regular rhetorical routine, on which the author, to vindicate his title, must trench somewhat freely. The proof that this is undersood to be so, is, that what is called an oratorical style is exploded from all good writing; that we immediately lay down an article, even in a common newspaper, in which such phrases occur as "the Angel of Reform," "the drooping Genius of Albion"; and that a very brilliant speech at a loyal dinner-party makes a very flimsy, insipid pamphlet. The orator has to get up for a certain occasion a striking compilation of partial topics, which, "to leave no rubs or botches in the work," must be pretty familiar as well as palatable to his hearers; and in doing this, he may avail himself of all the resources of an artificial memory. The writer must be original, or he is nothing. He is not to take up with ready-made goods; for he has time allowed him to create his own materials, and to make novel combinations of thought and fancy, to contend with unforeseen difficulties of style and execution, while we look on, and admire the growing work in secret and at leisure. There is a degree of finishing as well as of solid strength in writing which is not to be got at every day, and we can wait for perfection. The author owes a debt to truth and nature which he cannot satisfy at sight, but he has pawned his head on redeeming it. It is

not a string of clap-traps to answer a temporary or party purpose — violent, vulgar, and illiberal — but general and lasting truth that we require at his hands. We go to him as pupils, not as partisans. We have a right to expect from him profounder views of things; finer observations; more ingenious illustrations; happier and bolder expressions. He is to give the choice and picked results of a whole life of study; what he has struck out in his most felicitous moods, has treasured up with most pride, has laboured to bring to light with most anxiety and confidence of success. He may turn a period in his head fifty different ways, so that it comes out smooth and round at last. He may have caught a glimpse of a simile, and it may have vanished again: let him be on the watch for it, as the idle boy watches for the lurking-place of the adder. We can wait. He is not satisfied with a reason he has offered for something: let him wait till he finds a better reason. There is some word, some phrase, some idiom that expresses a particular idea better than any other, but he cannot for the life of him recollect it: let him wait till he does. Is it strange that among twenty thousand words in the English language, the one of all others that he most needs should have escaped him ? There are more things in nature than there are words in the English language, and he must not expect to lay rash hands on them all at once.

> Learn to *write* slow: all other graces
> Will follow in their proper places.[1]

[1] Hazlitt was much given to modifying quotations to suit his purpose. See William Walker's *Art of Reading:*

> Learn to read slow; all other graces
> Will follow in their proper places. — *Editor.*

You allow a writer a year to think of a subject; he should not put you off with a truism at last. You allow him a year more to find out words for his thoughts; he should not give us an echo of all the fine things that have been said a hundred times.[1] All authors, however, are not so squeamish; but take up with words and ideas as they find them delivered down to them. Happy are they who write Latin verses! — who copy the style of Dr. Johnson! — who hold up the phrase of ancient Pistol! They do not trouble themselves with those hair-breadth distinctions of thought or meaning that puzzle nicer heads; — let us leave them to their repose! A person in habits of composition often hesitates in conversation for a particular word: it is because he is in search of the best word, and *that* he cannot hit upon. In writing he would stop till it came.[2] It is not true, however, that the scholar could avail himself of a more ordinary word if he chose, or readily acquire a command of ordinary language; for his associations are habitually intense, not vague and shallow; and words occur to him only as *tallies* to certain modifications of feeling. They are links in the chain of thought. His imagination is fastidious, and rejects all those that are "of no mark or likelihood." Certain words are in his mind indissolubly wedded to certain things; and none are admitted at the *levée* of his thoughts but those of which the banns have been

[1] Just as a poet ought not to cheat us with lame metre and defective rhymes, which might be excusable in an improvisatori versifier. — *Author.*

[2] That is essentially a bad style which seems as if the person writing it never stopped for breath, nor gave himself a moment's pause, but strove to make up by redundancy and fluency for want of choice and correctness of expression. — *Author.*

solemnised with scrupulous propriety. Again, the student finds a stimulus to literary exertion, not in the immediate *éclat* of his undertaking, but in the difficulty of his subject, and the progressive nature of his task. He is not wound up to a sudden and extraordinary effort of presence of mind; but is for ever awake to the silent influxes of things, and his life is one long labour. Are there no sweeteners of his toil? No reflections, in the absence of popular applause or social indulgence, to cheer him on his way? Let the reader judge. *His* pleasure is the counterpart of, and borrowed from the same source as the writer's. A man does not read out of vanity, nor in company, but to amuse his own thoughts. If the reader, from disinterested and merely intellectual motives, relishes an author's "fancies and good nights," the last may be supposed to have relished them no less. If he laughs at a joke, the inventor chuckled over it to the full as much. If he is delighted with a phrase, he may be sure the writer jumped at it; if he is pleased to cull a straggling flower from the page, he may believe that it was plucked with no less fondness from the face of nature. Does he fasten, with gathering brow and looks intent, on some difficult speculation? He may be convinced that the writer thought it a fine thing to split his brain in solving so curious a problem, and to publish his discovery to the world. There is some satisfaction in the contemplation of power; there is also a little pride in the conscious possession of it. With what pleasure do we read books! If authors could but feel this, or remember what they themselves once felt, they would need no other temptation to persevere.

To conclude this account with what perhaps I ought to have set out with — a definition of the character of an

author. There are persons who in society, in public intercourse, feel no excitement,

Dull as the lake that slumbers in the storm,

but who, when left alone, can lash themselves into a foam. They are never less alone than when alone. Mount them on a dinner-table, and they have nothing to say; shut them up in a room by themselves, and they are inspired. They are "made fierce with dark keeping." In revenge for being tongue-tied, a torrent of words flows from their pens, and the storm which was so long collecting comes down apace. It never rains but it pours. Is not this strange, unaccountable? Not at all so. They have a real interest, a real knowledge of the subject, and they cannot summon up all that interest, or bring all that knowledge to bear, while they have anything else to attend to. Till they can do justice to the feeling they have, they can do nothing. For this they look into their own minds, not in the faces of a gaping multitude. What they would say (if they could) does not lie at the orifices of the mouth ready for delivery, but is wrapped in the folds of the heart and registered in the chambers of the brain. In the sacred cause of truth that stirs them, they would put their whole strength, their whole being into requisition; and as it implies a greater effort to drag their words and ideas from their lurking-places, so there is no end when they are once set in motion. The whole of a man's thoughts and feelings cannot lie on the surface, made up for use; but the whole must be a greater quantity, a mightier power, if they could be got at, layer under layer, and brought into play by the levers of imagination and reflection. Such a person then sees farther and feels

deeper than most others. He plucks up an argument by the roots, he tears out the very heart of his subject. He has more pride in conquering the difficulties of a question, than vanity in courting the favour of an audience. He wishes to satisfy himself before he pretends to enlighten the public. He takes an interest in things in the abstract more than by common consent. Nature is his mistress, truth his idol. The contemplation of a pure idea is the ruling passion of his breast. The intervention of other people's notions, the being the immediate object of their censure or their praise, puts him out. What will tell, what will produce an effect, he cares little about: and therefore he produces the greatest. The *personal* is to him an impertinence; so he conceals himself and writes. Solitude "becomes his glittering bride, and airy thoughts his children." Such a one is a true author; and not a member of any Debating Club or Dilettanti Society whatever! [1]

[1] I have omitted to dwell on some other differences of body and mind that often prevent the same person from shining in both capacities of speaker and writer. There are natural impediments to public speaking, such as the want of a strong voice and steady nerves. A high authority of the present day (Mr. Canning) has thought this a matter of so much importance, that he goes so far as even to let it affect the constitution of Parliament, and conceives that gentlemen who have not bold foreheads and brazen lungs, but modest pretensions and patriotic views, should be allowed to creep into the great assembly of the nation through the avenue of close boroughs, and not to be called upon "to face the storms of the hustings." In this point of view, Stentor was a man of genius, and a noisy jack-pudding may cut a considerable figure in the "Political House that Jack built." I fancy Mr. C. Wynne is the only person in the kingdom who has fully made up his mind that a total defect of voice is the most necessary qualification for a Speaker of the House of Commons! — *Author.*

II. PRINCIPLES OF GROWTH

PRINCIPLES OF GROWTH

SIDNEY THOMPSON DOBELL

1824–1874

This short passage, which serves as a kind of motto for the division of the book which it here introduces, is taken from an article on "Currer Bell" which Sidney Dobell contributed to *The Palladium* in September, 1850. *The Palladium* was a "monthly journal of literature, politics, science, and art," published in Edinburgh from July, 1850, to March, 1851 (nine numbers).

LET no man think to improve in his working by any knowledge that can be taken up or laid down at will, any means or appliances from without. All improvement in the creation must first exist in the creator. Say not to the artist, write, paint, play, by such and such a rule, but *grow* by it. Have you literary principles? — write them in your leisure hours on the fleshly tables of the heart. Have you theories of taste? — set your brain in idle time to their tune. Is there a virtue you would emulate, or a fault you would discard? — gaze on spare days upon the one till your soul has risen under it as the tide under the moon, or scourge the other in the sight of all your faculties till every internal sense recoils from its company. Then, when your error is no longer a trespass to be condemned by judgment, but an impiety at which feeling revolts — when your virtue is no more obedience to a formula, but the natural action of a reconstructed soul — strike off the clay mold from the bronze Apollo, throw your critics to one wind and their sermons to the other, let Self be made absolute as you take up your pen and write, like a god, in a sublime egotism, to which your own likes and dislikes are unquestioned law.

THE PRINCIPLES OF SUCCESS IN LITERATURE

GEORGE HENRY LEWES

1817–1878

"The Principles of Success in Literature" appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*, May 15–November 1, 1865, when Lewes was beginning his work as first editor of the periodical. In 1891 the entire treatise of six chapters was made available for classroom use by the thoughtfulness and painstaking of Professor F. N. Scott, whose text (published by Allyn and Bacon, Boston) is used in the chapters that follow. Although these two chapters are perhaps the most stimulating of the six, the serious student of writing would do well to read all of them.

CHAPTER II

THE PRINCIPLE OF VISION

i. *Value of Insight and Personal Experience*

ALL good Literature rests primarily on insight. All bad Literature rests upon imperfect insight, or upon imitation, which may be defined as seeing at second-hand.

There are men of clear insight who never become authors: some, because no sufficient solicitation from internal or external impulses makes them bend their energies to the task of giving literary expression to their thoughts; and some, because they lack the adequate powers of literary expression. But no man, be his felicity and facility of expression what they may, ever produces good Literature unless he sees for himself, and sees clearly. It is the very claim and purpose of Literature to show others what they failed to see. Unless a man

sees this clearly for himself, how can he show it to others?

Literature delivers tidings of the world within and the world without. It tells of the facts which have been witnessed, reproduces the emotions which have been felt. It places before the reader symbols which represent the absent facts, or the relations of these to other facts; and by the vivid presentation of the symbols of emotion kindles the emotive sympathy of readers. The art of selecting the fitting symbols, and of so arranging them as to be intelligible and kindling, distinguishes the great writer from the great thinker; it is an art which also relies on clear insight.

The value of the tidings brought by Literature is determined by their authenticity. At all times the air is noisy with rumours, but the real business of life is transacted on clear insight and authentic speech. False tidings and idle rumours may for an hour clamorously usurp attention, because they are believed to be true; but the cheat is soon discovered, and the rumour dies. In like manner Literature which is unauthentic may succeed as long as it is believed to be true: that is, so long as our intellects have not discovered the falseness of its pretensions, and our feelings have not disowned sympathy with its expressions. These may be truisms, but they are constantly disregarded. Writers have seldom any steadfast conviction that it is of primary necessity for them to deliver tidings about what they themselves have seen and felt. Perhaps their intimate consciousness assures them that what they have seen or felt is neither new nor important. It may not be new, it may not be intrinsically important; nevertheless, if authentic, it has its value, and a far greater value than anything

reported by them at second-hand. We cannot demand from every man that he have unusual depth of insight or exceptional experience; but we demand of him that he give us of his best, and his best cannot be another's. The facts seen through the vision of another, reported on the witness of another, may be true, but the reporter cannot vouch for them. Let the original observer speak for himself. Otherwise only rumours are set afloat. If you have never seen an acid combine with a base, you cannot instructively speak to me of salts; and this, of course, is true in a more emphatic degree with reference to more complex matters.

Personal experience is the basis of all real Literature. The writer must have thought the thoughts, seen the objects (with bodily or mental vision), and felt the feelings; otherwise he can have no power over us. Importance does not depend on rarity so much as on authenticity. The massacre of a distant tribe, which is heard through the report of others, falls far below the heart-shaking effect of a murder committed in our presence. Our sympathy with the unknown victim may originally have been as torpid as that with the unknown tribe; but it has been kindled by the swift and vivid suggestions of details visible to us as spectators; whereas a severe and continuous effort of imagination is needed to call up the kindling suggestions of the distant massacre.

So little do writers appreciate the importance of direct vision and experience, that they are in general silent about what they themselves have seen and felt, copious in reporting the experience of others. Nay, they are urgently prompted to say what they know others think, and what consequently they themselves may be expected to think. They are as if dismayed at their own

individuality, and suppress all traces of it in order to catch the general tone. Such men may, indeed, be of service in the ordinary commerce of Literature as distributors. All I wish to point out is that they are distributors, not producers. The commerce may be served by second-hand reporters, no less than by original seers; but we must understand this service to be commercial, and not literary. The common stock of knowledge gains from it no addition. The man who detects a new fact, a new property in a familiar substance, adds to the science of the age; but the man who expounds the whole system of the universe on the reports of others, unenlightened by new conceptions of his own, does not add a grain to the common store. Great writers may all be known by their solicitude about authenticity. A common incident, a simple phenomenon, which has been a part of their experience, often undergoes what may be called "a transfiguration" in their souls, and issues in the form of Art; while many world-agitating events in which they have not been actors, or majestic phenomena of which they were never spectators, are by them left to the unhesitating incompetence of writers who imagine that fine subjects make fine works. Either the great writer leaves such materials untouched, or he employs them as the vehicle of more cherished, because more authenticated, tidings, — he paints the ruin of an empire as the scenic background for his picture of the distress of two simple hearts. The inferior writer, because he lays no emphasis on authenticity, cannot understand this avoidance of imposing themes. Condemned by native incapacity to be a reporter, and not a seer, he hopes to shine by the reflected glory of his subjects. It is natural in him to mistake ambitious art for high art. He does not feel that the best is the highest.

I do not assert that inferior writers abstain from the familiar and trivial. On the contrary, as imitators, they imitate everything which great writers have shown to be sources of interest. But their bias is towards great subjects. They make no new ventures in the direction of personal experience. They are silent on all that they have really seen for themselves. Unable to see the deep significance of what is common, they spontaneously turn towards the uncommon.

There is, at the present day, a fashion in Literature, and in Art generally, which is very deplorable, and which may, on a superficial glance, appear at variance with what has just been said. The fashion is that of coat-and-waistcoat realism, a creeping timidity of invention, moving almost exclusively amid scenes of drawing-room existence, with all the reticences and pettinesses of drawing-room conventions. Artists have become photographers, and have turned the camera upon the vulgarities of life, instead of representing the more impassioned movements of life. The majority of books and pictures are addressed to our lower faculties; they make no effort as they have no power to stir our deeper emotions by the contagion of great ideas. Little that makes life noble and solemn is reflected in the Art of our day; to amuse a languid audience seems its highest aim. Seeing this, some of my readers may ask whether the artists have not been faithful to the law I have expounded, and chosen to paint the small things they have seen, rather than the great things they have not seen? The answer is simple. For the most part the artists have *not* painted what they have seen, but have been false and conventional in their pretended realism. And whenever they have painted truly, they have painted successfully. The

authenticity of their work has given it all the value which in the nature of things such work could have. Titian's portrait of 'The Young Man with a Glove' is a great work of art, though not of great art. It is infinitely higher than a portrait of Cromwell, by a painter unable to see into the great soul of Cromwell, and to make us see it; but it is infinitely lower than Titian's 'Tribute Money,' 'Peter the Martyr,' or the 'Assumption.' Tennyson's 'Northern Farmer' is incomparably greater as a poem than Mr. Bailey's ambitious 'Festus'; but the 'Northern Farmer' is far below 'Ulysses' or 'Guinevere,' because moving on a lower level, and recording the facts of a lower life.

Insight is the first condition of Art. Yet many a man who has never been beyond his village will be silent about that which he knows well, and will fancy himself called upon to speak of the tropics or the Andes — on the reports of others. Never having seen a greater man than the parson and the squire — and not having seen into them — he selects Cromwell and Plato, Raphael and Napoleon, as his models, in the vain belief that these impressive personalities will make his work impressive. Of course, I am speaking figuratively. By "never having been beyond his village," I understand a mental no less than topographical limitation. The penetrating sympathy of genius will, even from a village, traverse the whole world. What I mean is, that unless by personal experience, no matter through what avenues, a man has gained clear insight into the facts of life, he cannot successfully place them before us; and whatever insight he *has* gained, be it of important or of unimportant facts, will be of value if truly reproduced. No sunset is precisely similar to another, no two souls

are affected by it in a precisely similar way. Thus may the commonest phenomenon have a novelty. To the eye that can read aright there is an infinite variety even in the most ordinary human being. But to the careless, indiscriminating eye all individuality is merged in a misty generality. Nature and men yield nothing new to such a mind. Of what avail is it for a man to walk out into the tremulous mists of morning, to watch the slow sunset, and wait for the rising stars, if he can tell us nothing about these but what others have already told us — if he feels nothing but what others have already felt? Let a man look for himself and tell truly what he sees. We will listen to that. We must listen to it, for its very authenticity has a subtle power of compulsion. What others have seen and felt we can learn better from their own lips.

ii. *Psychology of Mental Vision*

I have not yet explained in any formal manner what the nature of that insight is which constitutes what I have named the Principle of Vision; although doubtless the reader has gathered its meaning from the remarks already made. For the sake of future applications of the principle to the various questions of philosophical criticism which must arise in the course of this inquiry, it may be needful here to explain (as I have already explained elsewhere) how the chief intellectual operations — Perception, Inference, Reasoning, and Imagination — may be viewed as so many forms of mental vision.

Perception, as distinguished from Sensation, is the presentation before Consciousness of the details which once were present in conjunction with the object at this moment affecting Sense. These details are inferred to be

still in conjunction with the object, although not revealed to Sense. Thus when an apple is perceived by me, who merely see it, all that Sense reports is of a certain coloured surface: the roundness, the firmness, the fragrance, and the taste of the apple are not present to Sense, but are made present to Consciousness by the act of Perception. The eye sees a certain coloured surface; the mind sees at the same instant many other co-existent but unapparent facts — it reinstates in their due order these unapparent facts. Were it not for this mental vision supplying the deficiencies of ocular vision, the coloured surface would be an enigma. But the suggestion of Sense rapidly recalls the experiences previously associated with the object. The apparent facts disclose the facts that are unapparent.

Inference is only a higher form of the same process. We look from the window, see the dripping leaves and the wet ground, and infer that rain has fallen. It is on inferences of this kind that all knowledge depends. The extension of the known to the unknown, of the apparent to the unapparent, gives us Science. Except in the grandeur of its sweep, the mind pursues the same course in the interpretation of geological facts as in the interpretation of the ordinary incidents of daily experience. To read the pages of the great Stone Book, and to perceive from the wet streets that rain has recently fallen, are forms of the same intellectual process. In the one case the inference traverses immeasurable spaces of time, connecting the apparent facts with causes (unapparent facts) similar to those which have been associated in experience with such results; in the other case the inference connects wet streets and swollen gutters with causes which have been associated in experience

with such results. Let the inference span with its mighty arch a myriad of years, or link together the events of a few minutes, in each case the arch rises from the ground of familiar facts, and reaches an antecedent which is known to be a cause capable of producing them.

The mental vision by which in Perception we see the unapparent details — *i.e.*, by which sensations formerly co-existing with the one now affecting us are reinstated under the form of ideas which *represent* the objects — is a process implied in all Ratiocination, which also presents an *ideal series*, such as would be a series of sensations, if the objects themselves were before us. A chain of reasoning is a chain of inferences: *ideal* presentations of objects and relations not apparent to Sense, or not presentable to Sense. Could we realise all the links in this chain, by placing the objects in their actual order as a *visible* series, the reasoning would be a succession of perceptions. Thus the path of a planet is seen by reason to be an ellipse. It would be perceived as a fact, if we were in a proper position and endowed with the requisite means of following the planet in its course; but not having this power, we are reduced to infer the unapparent points in its course from the points which are apparent. We see them mentally. Correct reasoning is the ideal assemblage of objects in their actual order of co-existence and succession. It is seeing with the mind's eye. False reasoning is owing to some misplacement of the order of objects, or to the omission of some links in the chain, or to the introduction of objects not properly belonging to the series. It is distorted or defective vision. The terrified traveller sees a highwayman in what is really a sign-post in the twilight; and in the twilight of

knowledge, the terrified philosopher sees a pestilence foreshadowed by an eclipse.

Let attention also be called to one great source of error, which is also a great source of power, namely, that much of our thinking is carried on by signs instead of images. We use words as signs of objects; these suffice to carry on the train of inference, when very few images of the objects are called up. Let any one attend to his thoughts and he will be surprised to find how rare and indistinct in general are the images of objects which arise before his mind. If he says, "I shall take a cab and get to the railway by the shortest cut," it is ten to one that he forms no image of cab or railway, and but a very vague image of the streets through which the shortest cut will lead. Imaginative minds see images where ordinary minds see nothing but signs: this is a source of power; but it is also a source of weakness; for in the practical affairs of life, and in the theoretical investigations of philosophy, a too active imagination is apt to distract the attention and scatter the energies of the mind.

In complex trains of thought signs are indispensable. The images, when called up, are only vanishing suggestions: they disappear before they are more than half formed. And yet it is because signs are thus substituted for images (paper transacting the business of money) that we are so easily imposed upon by verbal fallacies and meaningless phrases. A scientific man of some eminence was once taken in by a wag, who gravely asked him whether he had read Bunsen's paper on the *malleability* of light. He confessed that he had not read it: "Bunsen sent it to me, but I've not had time to look into it."

The degree in which each mind habitually substitutes signs for images will be, *ceteris paribus*, the degree in which it is liable to error. This is not contradicted by the fact that mathematical, astronomical, and physical reasonings may, when complex, be carried on more successfully by the employment of signs; because in these cases the signs themselves accurately represent the abstractness of the relations. Such sciences deal only with relations, and not with objects; hence greater simplification ensures greater accuracy. But no sooner do we quit this sphere of abstractions, to enter that of concrete things, than the use of symbols becomes a source of weakness. Vigorous and effective minds habitually deal with concrete images. This is notably the case with poets and great literates. Their vision is keener than that of other men. However rapid and remote their flight of thought, it is a succession of images, not of abstractions. The details which give significance, and which by us are seen vaguely as through a vanishing mist, are by them seen in sharp outlines. The image which to us is a mere suggestion, is to them almost as vivid as the object. And it is because they see vividly that they can paint effectively.

Most readers will recognise this to be true of poets, but will doubt its application to philosophers, because imperfect psychology and unscientific criticism have disguised the identity of intellectual processes until it has become a paradox to say that imagination is not less indispensable to the philosopher than to the poet. The paradox falls directly we restate the proposition thus: both poet and philosopher draw their power from the energy of their mental vision — an energy which disengages the mind from the somnolence of habit and from

the pressure of obtrusive sensations. In general men are passive under Sense and the routine of habitual inferences. They are unable to free themselves from the importunities of the apparent facts and apparent relations which solicit their attention; and when they make room for unapparent facts, it is only for those which are familiar to their minds. Hence they can see little more than what they have been taught to see; they can only think what they have been taught to think. For independent vision, and original conception, we must go to children and men of genius. The spontaneity of the one is the power of the other. Ordinary men live among marvels and feel no wonder, grow familiar with objects and learn nothing new about them. Then comes an independent mind which *sees;* and it surprises us to find how servile we have been to habit and opinion, how blind to what we also might have seen, had we used our eyes. The link, so long hidden, has now been made visible to us. We hasten to make it visible to others. But the flash of light which revealed that obscured object does not help us to discover others. Darkness still conceals much that we do not even suspect. We continue our routine. We always think our views correct and complete; if we thought otherwise they would cease to be our views; and when the man of keener insight discloses our error, and reveals relations hitherto unsuspected, we learn to see with his eyes, and exclaim: "Now surely we have got the truth."

iii. *Vision the Criterion of Genius*

A child is playing with a piece of paper and brings it near the flame of a candle; another child looks on. Both are completely absorbed by the objects, both are ignorant or oblivious of the relation between the combustible

object and the flame: a relation which becomes apparent only when the paper is alight. What is called the thoughtlessness of childhood prevents their seeing this unapparent fact; it is a fact which has not been sufficiently impressed upon their experience so as to form an indissoluble element in their conception of the two in juxtaposition. Whereas in the mind of the nurse this relation is so vividly impressed that no sooner does the paper approach the flame than the unapparent fact becomes almost as visible as the objects, and a warning is given. She sees what the children do not, or cannot see. It has become part of her organised experience.

The superiority of one mind over another depends on the rapidity with which experiences are thus organised. The superiority may be general or special: it may manifest itself in a power of assimilating very various experiences, so as to have manifold relations familiar to it, or in a power of assimilating very special relations, so as to constitute a distinctive aptitude for one branch of art or science. The experience which is thus organised must of course have been originally a direct object of consciousness, either as an impressive fact or impressive interence. Unless the paper had been seen to burn, no one could know that contact with flame would consume it. By a vivid remembrance the experience of the past is made available to the present, so that we do not need actually to burn paper once more — we see the relation mentally. In like manner, Newton did not need to go through the demonstrations of many complex problems, they flashed upon him as he read the propositions; they were seen by him in that rapid glance, as they would have been made visible through the slower process of demonstration. A good chemist does not need to test

many a proposition by bringing actual gases or acids into operation, and seeing the result; he *foresees* the result: his mental vision of the objects and their properties is so keen, his experience is so organised, that the result which would be visible in an experiment, is visible to him in an intuition. A fine poet has no need of the actual presence of men and women under the fluctuating impatience of emotion, or under the steadfast hopelessness of grief; he needs no setting sun before his window, under it no sullen sea. These are all visible, and their fluctuations are visible. He sees the quivering lip, the agitated soul; he hears the aching cry, and the dreary wash of waves upon the beach.

The writer who pretends to instruct us should first assure himself that he has clearer vision of the things he speaks of — knows them and their qualities, if not better than we, at least with some distinctive knowledge. Otherwise he should announce himself as a mere echo, a middleman, a distributor. Our need is for more light. This can be given only by an independent seer who

> Lends a precious seeing to the eye.
> [*Love's Labour's Lost*, IV, 3.]

All great authors are seers. "Perhaps if we should meet Shakspeare," says Emerson, "we should not be conscious of any steep inferiority; no: but of great equality;— only that he possessed a strange skill of using, of classifying, his facts, which we lacked. For, notwithstanding our utter incapacity to produce anything like 'Hamlet' or 'Othello,' we see the perfect reception this wit and immense knowledge of life and liquid eloquence find in us all."[1] This aggrandisement of our common

[1] Essay on *Intellect*.

stature rests on questionable ground. If our capacity of being moved by Shakspeare discloses a community, our incapacity of producing 'Hamlet' no less discloses our inferiority. It is certain that could we meet Shakspeare we should find him strikingly like ourselves — with the same faculties, the same sensibilities, though not in the same degree. The secret of his power over us lies, of course, in our having the capacity to appreciate him. Yet we seeing him in the unimpassioned moods of daily life, it is more than probable that we should see nothing in him but what was ordinary; nay, in some qualities he would seem inferior. Heroes require a perspective. They are men who look superhuman only when elevated on the pedestals of their achievements. In ordinary life, they look like ordinary men; not that they are of the common mould, but seem so because their uncommon qualities are not then called forth. Superiority requires an occasion. The common man is helpless in an emergency: assailed by contradictory suggestions, or confused by his incapacity, he cannot see his way. The hour of emergency finds a hero calm and strong, and strong because calm and clear-sighted; he sees what can be done, and does it. This is often a thing of great simplicity, so that we marvel others did not see it. Now it has been done, and proved successful, many underrate its value, thinking that they also would have done precisely the same thing. The world is more just. It refuses to men unassailed by the difficulties of a situation the glory they have not earned. The world knows how easy most things appear when they have once been done. We can all make the egg stand on end after Columbus.

Shakspeare, then, would probably not impress us with

a sense of our inferiority if we were to meet him to-morrow. Most likely we should be bitterly disappointed; because, having formed our conception of him as the man who wrote 'Hamlet' and 'Othello,' we forget that these were not the products of his ordinary moods, but the manifestations of his power at white heat. In ordinary moods he must be very much as ordinary men, and it is in these we meet him. How notorious is the astonishment of friends and associates when any man's achievements suddenly emerge into renown. "They could never have believed it." Why should they? Knowing him only as one of their circle, and not being gifted with the penetration which discerns a latent energy, but only with the vision which discerns apparent results, they are taken by surprise. Nay, so biassed are we by superficial judgments, that we frequently ignore the palpable fact of achieved excellence simply because we cannot reconcile it with our judgment of the man who achieved it. The deed has been done, the work written, the picture painted; it is before the world, and the world is ringing with applause. There is no doubt whatever that the man whose name is in every mouth did the work; but because our personal impressions of him do not correspond with our conceptions of a powerful man, we abate or withdraw our admiration, and attribute his success to lucky accident. This blear-eyed, taciturn, timid man, whose knowledge of many things is manifestly imperfect, whose inaptitude for many things is apparent, can *he* be the creator of such glorious works? Can *he* be the large and patient thinker, the delicate humourist, the impassioned poet? Nature seems to have answered this question for us; yet so little are we inclined to accept Nature's emphatic testimony on this

point, that few of us ever see without disappointment the man whose works have revealed his greatness.

It stands to reason that we should not rightly appreciate Shakspeare if we were to meet him, simply because we should meet him as an ordinary man, and not as the author of 'Hamlet.' Yet if we had a keen insight we should detect even in his quiet talk the marks of an original mind. We could not, of course, divine, without evidence, how deep and clear his insight, how mighty his power over grand representative symbols, how prodigal his genius: these only could appear on adequate occasions. But we should notice that he had an independent way of looking at things. He would constantly bring before us some latent fact, some unsuspected relation, some resemblance between dissimilar things. We should feel that his utterances were not echoes. If therefore, in these moments of equable serenity, his mind glancing over trivial things saw them with great clearness, we might infer that in moments of intense activity his mind gazing steadfastly on important things would see wonderful visions, where to us all was vague and shifting. During our quiet walk with him across the fields he said little, or little that was memorable; but his eye was taking in the varying forms and relations of objects, and slowly feeding his mind with images. The common hedge-row, the gurgling brook, the waving corn, the shifting cloud-architecture, and the sloping uplands, have been seen by us a thousand times, but they show us nothing new; they have been seen by him a thousand times, and each time with fresh interest, and fresh discovery. If he describes that walk he will surprise us with revelations: we can then and thereafter see all that he points out; but we needed his vision to direct our

own. And it is one of the incalculable influences of poetry that each new revelation is an education of the eye and the feelings. We learn to see and feel Nature in a far clearer and profounder way, now that we have been taught to look by poets. The incurious, unimpassioned gaze of the Alpine peasant on the scenes which mysteriously and profoundly affect the cultivated tourist, is the gaze of one who has never been taught to look. The greater sensibility of educated Europeans to influences which left even the poetic Greeks unmoved, is due to the directing vision of successive poets.

The great difficulty which besets us all — Shakspeares and others, but Shakspeares less than others — is the difficulty of disengaging the mind from the thraldom of sensation and habit, and escaping from the pressure of objects immediately present, or of ideas which naturally emerge, linked together as they are by old associations. We have to see anew, to think anew. It requires great vigour to escape from the old and spontaneously recurrent trains of thought. And as this vigour is native, not acquired, my readers may, perhaps, urge the futility of expounding with so much pains a principle of success in Literature which, however indispensable, must be useless as a guide; they may object that although good Literature rests on insight, there is nothing to be gained by saying "unless a man have the requisite insight he will not succeed." But there is something to be gained. In the first place, this is an analytical inquiry into the conditions of success: it aims at discriminating the leading principles which inevitably determine success. In the second place, supposing our analysis of the conditions to be correct, practical guidance must follow. We cannot, it is true, gain clearness

of vision simply by recognising its necessity; but by recognising its necessity we are taught to seek for it as a primary condition of success; we are forced to come to an understanding with ourselves as to whether we have or have not a distinct vision of the thing we speak of, whether we are seers or reporters, whether the ideas and feelings have been thought and felt by us as part and parcel of our own individual experience, or have been echoed by us from the books and conversation of others? We can always ask, are we painting farm-houses or fairies because these are genuine visions of our own, or only because farm-houses and fairies have been successfully painted by others, and are poetic material?

The man who first saw an acid redden a vegetable-blue, had something to communicate; and the man who first saw (mentally) that all acids redden vegetable-blues, had something to communicate. But no man can do this again. In the course of his teaching he may have frequently to report the fact; but this repetition is not of much value unless it can be made to disclose some new relation. And so of other and more complex cases. Every sincere man can determine for himself whether he has any authentic tidings to communicate; and although no man can hope to discover much that is actually new, he ought to assure himself that even what is old in his work has been authenticated by his own experience. He should not even speak of acids reddening vegetable-blues upon mere hearsay, unless he is speaking figuratively. All his facts should have been verified by himself, all his ideas should have been thought by himself. In proportion to the fulfilment of this condition will be his success; in proportion to its non-fulfilment, his failure.

Literature in its vast extent includes writers of three different classes, and in speaking of success we must always be understood to mean the acceptance each writer gains in his own class; otherwise a flashy novelist might seem more successful than a profound poet; a clever compiler more successful than an original discoverer.

The Primary Class is composed of the born seers — men who see for themselves and who originate. These are poets, philosophers, discoverers. The Secondary Class is composed of men less puissant in faculty, but genuine also in their way, who travel along the paths opened by the great originators, and also point out many a side-path and shorter cut. They reproduce and vary the materials furnished by others, but they do this, not as echoes only, they authenticate their tidings, they take care to see what the discoverers have taught them to see, and in consequence of this clear vision they are enabled to arrange and modify the materials so as to produce new results. The Primary Class is composed of men of genius, the Secondary Class of men of talent. It not unfrequently happens, especially in philosophy and science, that the man of talent may confer a lustre on the original invention; he takes it up a nugget and lays it down a coin. Finally, there is the largest class of all, comprising the Imitators in Art, and the Compilers in Philosophy. These bring nothing to the general stock. They are sometimes (not often) useful; but it is as corn-factors, not as corn-growers. They sometimes do good service by distributing knowledge where otherwise it might never penetrate; but in general their work is more hurtful than beneficial: hurtful, because it is essentially bad work, being insincere work, and because it stands in the way of better work.

Even among Imitators and Compilers there are almost infinite degrees of merit and demerit: echoes of echoes reverberating echoes in endless succession; compilations of all degrees of worth and worthlessness. But, as will be shown hereafter, even in this lower sphere the worth of the work is strictly proportional to the Vision, Sincerity, and Beauty; so that an imitator whose eye is keen for the forms he imitates, whose speech is honest, and whose talent has grace, will by these very virtues rise almost to the Secondary Class, and will secure an honourable success.

I have as yet said but little, and that incidentally, of the part played by the Principle of Vision in Art. Many readers who will admit the principle in Science and Philosophy, may hesitate in extending it to Art, which, as they conceive, draws its inspirations from the Imagination. Properly understood there is no discrepancy between the two opinions; and in the next chapter I shall endeavour to show how Imagination is only another form of this very Principle of Vision which we have been considering.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRINCIPLE OF SINCERITY

i. *Literature and the Public*

IT is always understood as an expression of condemnation when anything in Literature or Art is said to be done for effect; and yet to produce an effect is the aim and end of both.

There is nothing beyond a verbal ambiguity here if we look at it closely, and yet there is a corresponding uncertainty in the conception of Literature and Art

commonly entertained, which leads many writers and many critics into the belief that what are called "effects" should be sought, and when found must succeed. It is desirable to clear up this moral ambiguity, as I may call it, and to show that the real method of securing the legitimate effect is not to aim at it, but to aim at the truth, relying on that for securing effect. The condemnation of whatever is "done for effect" obviously springs from indignation at a disclosed insincerity in the artist, who is self-convicted of having neglected truth for the sake of our applause; and we refuse our applause to the flatterer, or give it contemptuously as to a mountebank whose dexterity has amused us.

It is unhappily true that much insincere Literature and Art, executed solely with a view to effect, does succeed by deceiving the public. But this is only because the simulation of truth or the blindness of the public conceals the insincerity. As a maxim, the Principle of Sincerity is admitted. Nothing but what is true, or is held to be true, can succeed; anything which looks like insincerity is condemned. In this respect we may compare it with the maxim of Honesty the best policy. No far-reaching intellect fails to perceive that if all men were uniformly upright and truthful, Life would be more victorious, and Literature more noble. We find, however, both in Life and Literature, a practical disregard of the truth of these propositions almost equivalent to a disbelief in them. Many men are keenly alive to the social advantages of honesty — in the practice of others. They are also strongly impressed with the conviction that in their own particular case the advantage will sometimes lie in not strictly adhering to the rule. Honesty is doubtless the best policy in the long run; but

somehow the run here seems so very long, and a short-cut opens such allurements to impatient desire. It requires a firm calm insight, or a noble habit of thought, to steady the wavering mind, and direct it away from delusive short-cuts: to make belief practice, and forego immediate triumph. Many of those who unhesitatingly admit Sincerity to be one great condition of success in Literature find it difficult, and often impossible, to resist the temptation of an insincerity which promises immediate advantage. It is not only the grocers who sand their sugar before prayers. Writers who know well enough that the triumph of falsehood is an unholy triumph, are not deterred from falsehood by that knowledge. They know, perhaps, that, even if undetected, it will press on their own consciences; but the knowledge avails them little. The immediate pressure of the temptation is yielded to, and Sincerity remains a text to be preached to others. To gain applause they will misstate facts, to gain victory in argument they will misrepresent the opinions they oppose; and they suppress the rising misgivings by the dangerous sophism that to discredit error is good work, and by the hope that no one will detect the means by which the work is effected. The saddest aspect of this procedure is that in Literature, as in Life, a temporary success often does reward dishonesty. It would be insincere to conceal it. To gain a reputation as discoverers men will invent or suppress facts. To appear learned, they will array their writings in the ostentation of borrowed citations. To solicit the "sweet voices" of the crowd, they will feign sentiments they do not feel, and utter what they think the crowd will wish to hear, keeping back whatever the crowd will hear with disapproval. And, as I said, such men often succeed

for a time; the fact is so, and we must not pretend that it is otherwise. But it no more disturbs the fundamental truth of the Principle of Sincerity than the perturbations in the orbit of Mars disturb the truth of Kepler's law.

It is impossible to deny that dishonest men often grow rich and famous, becoming powerful in their parish or in parliament. Their portraits simper from shop windows; and they live and die respected. This success is theirs; yet it is not the success which a noble soul will envy. Apart from the risk of discovery and infamy, there is the certainty of a conscience ill at ease, or if at ease, so blunted in its sensibilities, so given over to lower lusts, that a healthy instinct recoils from such a state. Observe, moreover, that in Literature the possible rewards of dishonesty are small, and the probability of detection great. In Life a dishonest man is chiefly moved by desires towards some tangible result of money or power; if he get these he has got all. The man of letters has a higher aim; the very object of his toil is to secure the sympathy and respect of men; and the rewards of his toil may be paid in money, fame, or consciousness of earnest effort. The first of these may sometimes be gained without Sincerity. Fame may also, for a time, be erected on an unstable ground, though it will inevitably be destroyed again. But the last and not least reward is to be gained by every one without fear of failure, without risk of change. Sincere work is good work, be it never so humble; and sincere work is not only an indestructible delight to the worker by its very genuineness, but is immortal in the best sense, for it lives for ever in its influence. There is no good Dictionary, not even a good Index, that is not in this sense priceless, for it has

honestly furthered the work of the world, saving labour to others, setting an example to successors. Whether I make a careful Index, or an inaccurate one, will probably in no respect affect the money-payment I shall receive. My sins will never fall heavily on me; my virtue will gain me neither extra pence nor praise. I shall be hidden by obscurity from the indignation of those whose valuable time is wasted over my pretence at accuracy, as from the silent gratitude of those whose time is saved by my honest fidelity. The consciousness of faithfulness even to the poor index maker may be a better reward than pence or praise; but of course we cannot expect the unconscientious to believe this. If I sand my sugar,and tell lies over my counter, I may gain the rewards of dishonesty, or I may be overtaken by its Nemesis. But if I am faithful in my work the reward cannot be withheld from me. The obscure workers who, knowing that they will never earn renown yet feel an honourable pride in doing their work faithfully, may be likened to the benevolent who feel a noble delight in performing generous actions which will never be known to be theirs, the only end they seek in such actions being the good which is wrought for others, and their delight being the sympathy with others.

I should be ashamed to insist on truths so little likely to be disputed, did they not point directly at the great source of bad Literature, which, as was said in our first chapter, springs from a want of proper moral guidance rather than from deficiency of talent. The Principle of Sincerity comprises all those qualities of courage, patience, honesty, and simplicity which give momentum to talent, and determine successful Literature. It is not enough to have the eye to see; there must also be the

courage to express what the eye has seen, and the steadfastness of a trust in truth. Insight, imagination, grace of style are potent; but their power is delusive unless sincerely guided. If any one should object that this is a truism, the answer is ready: Writers disregard its truth as traders disregard the truism of Honesty being the best policy. Nay, as even the most upright men are occasionally liable to swerve from the truth, so the most upright authors will in some passages desert a perfect sincerity; yet the ideal of both is rigorous truth. Men who are never flagrantly dishonest are at times unveracious in small matters, colouring or suppressing facts with a conscious purpose; and writers who never stole an idea nor pretended to honours for which they had not striven, may be found lapsing into small insincerities, speaking a language which is not theirs, uttering opinions which they expect to gain applause rather than the opinions really believed by them. But if few men are perfectly and persistently sincere, Sincerity is nevertheless the only enduring strength.

The principle is universal, stretching from the highest purposes of Literature down to its smallest details. It underlies the labour of the philosopher, the investigator, the moralist, the poet, the novelist, the critic, the historian, and the compiler. It is visible in the publication of opinions, in the structure of sentences, and in the fidelity of citations. Men utter insincere thoughts, they express themselves in echoes and affectations, and they are careless or dishonest in their use of the labours of others, all the time believing in the virtue of sincerity, all the time trying to make others believe honesty to be the best policy.

Let us glance for a moment at the most important

applications of the principle. A man must be himself convinced if he is to convince others. The prophet must be his own disciple, or he will make none. Enthusiasm is contagious: belief creates belief. There is no influence issuing from unbelief or from languid acquiescence. This is peculiarly noticeable in Art, because Art depends on sympathy for its influence, and unless the artist has felt the emotions he depicts we remain unmoved: in proportion to the depth of his feeling is our sympathetic response; in proportion to the shallowness or falsehood of his presentation is our coldness or indifference. Many writers who have been fond of quoting the *si vis me flere*[1] of Horace have written as if they did not believe a word of it; for they have been silent on their own convictions, suppressed their own experience, and falsified their own feelings to repeat the convictions and fine phrases of another. I am sorry that my experience assures me that many of those who will read with complete assent all here written respecting the power of Sincerity, will basely desert their allegiance to the truth the next time they begin to write; and they will desert it because their misguided views of Literature prompt them to think more of what the public is likely to applaud than of what is worth applause; unfortunately for them their estimation of this likelihood is generally based on a very erroneous assumption of public wants: they grossly mistake the taste they pander to.

ii. *The Value of Sincerity*

In all sincere speech there is power, not necessarily great power, but as much as the speaker is capable of.

[1] *Ars Poetica*, l. 102. "If you wish me to weep, you must yourself grieve first." — *Editor.*

Speak for yourself and from yourself, or be silent. It can be of no good that you should tell in your "clever" feeble way what another has already told us with the dynamic energy of conviction. If you can tell us something that your own eyes have seen, your own mind has thought, your own heart has felt, you will have power over us, and all the real power that is possible for you. If what you have seen is trivial, if what you have thought is erroneous, if what you have felt is feeble, it would assuredly be better that you should not speak at all; but if you insist on speaking, Sincerity will secure the uttermost of power.[1]

The delusions of self-love cannot be prevented, but intellectual misconceptions as to the means of achieving success may be corrected. Thus although it may not be possible for any introspection to discover whether we have genius or effective power, it is quite possible to know whether we are trading upon borrowed capital, and whether the eagle's feathers have been picked up by us, or grow from our own wings. I hear some one of my young readers exclaim against the disheartening tendency of what is here said. Ambitious of success, and conscious that he has no great resources within his own experience, he shrinks from the idea of being thrown upon his naked faculty and limited resources, when he feels himself capable of dexterously using the resources of others, and so producing an effective work. "Why," he asks, "must I confine myself to my own small experience, when I feel persuaded that it will interest no

[1] "Every effort of art," said Mr. Kipling to a newspaper reporter who interviewed him, "is an effort to be sincere. There is no surer guide than the determination to tell the truth that one feels." — *Editor.*

one? Why express the opinions to which my own investigations have led me when I suspect that they are incomplete, perhaps altogether erroneous, and when I know that they will not be popular because they are unlike those which have hitherto found favour? Your restrictions would reduce two-thirds of our writers to silence!"

This reduction would, I suspect, be welcomed by every one except the gagged writers; but as the idea of its being operative is too chimerical for us to entertain it, and as the purpose of these pages is to expound the principles of success and failure, not to make quixotic onslaughts on the windmills of stupidity and conceit, I answer my young interrogator: "Take warning and do not write. Unless you believe in yourself, only noodles will believe in you, and they but tepidly. If your experience seems trivial to you, it must seem trivial to us. If your thoughts are not fervid convictions, or sincere doubts, they will not have the power of convictions and doubts. To believe in yourself is the first step; to proclaim your belief the next. You cannot assume the power of another. No jay becomes an eagle by borrowing a few eagle feathers. It is true that your sincerity will not be a guarantee of power. You may believe that to be important and novel which we all recognise as trivial and old. You may be a madman, and believe yourself a prophet. You may be a mere echo, and believe yourself a voice. These are among the delusions against which none of us are protected. But if Sincerity is not necessarily a guarantee of power, it is a necessary condition of power, and no genius or prophet can exist without it."

"The highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and

Milton," says Emerson,[1] "is that they set at nought books and traditions, and spoke not what men thought, but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within; more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought because it is his. In every work of genius we recognise our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty." It is strange that any one who has recognised the individuality of all works of lasting influence, should not also recognise the fact that his own individuality ought to be steadfastly preserved. As Emerson says in continuation, "Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impressions with good-humoured inflexibility, then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our opinion from another." Accepting the opinions of another and the tastes of another is very different from agreement in opinion and taste. Originality is independence, not rebellion; it is sincerity, not antagonism. Whatever you believe to be true and false, that proclaim to be true and false; whatever you think admirable and beautiful, that should be your model, even if all your friends and all the critics storm at you as a crotchet-monger and an eccentric. Whether the public will feel its truth and beauty at once, or after long years, or never cease to regard it as paradox and ugliness, no man can foresee; enough for you to know that you have done your best, have been

[1] Essay on *Self-Reliance*.

true to yourself, and that the utmost power inherent in your work has been displayed.

An orator whose purpose is to persuade men must speak the things they wish to hear; an orator, whose purpose is to move men, must also avoid disturbing the emotional effect by any obtrusion of intellectual antagonism; but an author whose purpose is to instruct men, who appeals to the intellect, must be careless of their opinions, and think only of truth. It will often be a question when a man is or is not wise in advancing unpalatable opinions, or in preaching heresies; but it can never be a question that a man should be silent if unprepared to speak the truth as he conceives it. Deference to popular opinion is one great source of bad writing, and is all the more disastrous because the deference is paid to some purely hypothetical requirement. When a man fails to see the truth of certain generally accepted views, there is no law compelling him to provoke animosity by announcing his dissent. He may be excused if he shrink from the lurid glory of martyrdom; he may be justified in not placing himself in a position of singularity. He may even be commended for not helping to perplex mankind with doubts which he feels to be founded on limited and possibly erroneous investigation. But if allegiance to truth lays no stern command upon him to speak out his immature dissent, it does lay a stern command not to speak out hypocritical assent. There are many justifications of silence; there can be none of insincerity.

Nor is this less true of minor questions; it applies equally to opinions on matters of taste and personal feeling. Why should I echo what seem to me the extravagant praises of Raphael's 'Transfiguration,' when,

in truth, I do not greatly admire that famous work? There is no necessity for me to speak on the subject at all; but if I do speak, surely it is to utter my impressions, and not to repeat what others have uttered. Here, then, is a dilemma; if I say what I really feel about this work, after vainly endeavouring day after day to discover the transcendent merits discovered by thousands (or at least proclaimed by them), there is every likelihood of my incurring the contempt of connoisseurs, and of being reproached with want of taste in art. This is the bugbear which scares thousands. For myself, I would rather incur the contempt of connoisseurs than my own; the reproach of defective taste is more endurable than the reproach of insincerity. Suppose I *am* deficient in the requisite knowledge and sensibility, shall I be less so by pretending to admire what really gives me no exquisite enjoyment? Will the pleasure I feel in pictures be enhanced because other men consider me right in my admiration, or diminished because they consider me wrong? [1]

The opinion of the majority is not lightly to be rejected; but neither is it to be carelessly echoed. There is something noble in the submission to a great renown,

[1] I have never thoroughly understood the painful anxiety of people to be shielded against the dishonouring suspicion of not rightly appreciating pictures, even when the very phrases they use betray their ignorance and insensibility. Many will avow their indifference to music, and almost boast of their ignorance of science; will sneer at abstract theories, and profess the most tepid interest in history, who would feel it an unpardonable insult if you doubted their enthusiasm for painting and the "old masters" (by them secretly identified with the brown masters). It is an insincerity fostered by general pretence. Each man is afraid to declare his real sentiments in the presence of others equally timid. Massive authority overawes genuine feeling. — *Author.*

which makes all reverence a healthy attitude if it be genuine. When I think of the immense fame of Raphael, and of how many high and delicate minds have found exquisite delight even in the 'Transfiguration,' and especially when I recall how others of his works have affected me, it is natural to feel some diffidence in opposing the judgment of men whose studies have given them the best means of forming that judgment — a diffidence which may keep me silent on the matter. To start with the assumption that you are right, and all who oppose you are fools, cannot be a safe method. Nor in spite of a conviction that much of the admiration expressed for the 'Transfiguration' is lip-homage and tradition, ought the non-admiring to assume that all of it is insincere. It is quite compatible with modesty to be perfectly independent, and with sincerity to be respectful to the opinions and tastes of others. If you express any opinion, you are bound to express your real opinion; let critics and admirers utter what dithyrambs they please. Were this terror of not being thought correct in taste once got rid of, how many stereotyped judgments on books and pictures would be broken up! and the result of this sincerity would be some really valuable criticism. In the presence of Raphael's 'Sistine Madonna,' Titian's 'Peter the Martyr,' or Masaccio's great frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel, one feels as if there had been nothing written about these mighty works, so little does any eulogy discriminate the elements of their profound effects, so little have critics expressed their own thoughts and feelings. Yet every day some wandering connoisseur stands before these pictures, and at once, without waiting to let them sink deep into his mind, discovers all the merits which are

stereotyped in the criticisms, and discovers nothing else. He does not wait to feel, he is impatient to range himself with men of taste; he discards all genuine impressions, replacing them with vague conceptions of what he is expected to see.

Inasmuch as success must be determined by the relation between the work and the public, the sincerity which leads a man into open revolt against established opinions may seem to be an obstacle. Indeed, publishers, critics, and friends are always loud in their prophecies against originality and independence on this very ground; they do their utmost to stifle every attempt at novelty, because they fix their eyes upon a hypothetical public taste, and think that only what has already been proved successful can again succeed; forgetting that whatever has once been done need not be done over again, and forgetting that what is now commonplace was once originality. There are cases in which a disregard of public opinion will inevitably call forth opprobrium and neglect; but there is no case in which Sincerity is not strength. If I advance new views in Philosophy or Theology, I cannot expect to have many adherents among minds altogether unprepared for such views; yet it is certain that even those who most fiercely oppose me will recognise the power of my voice if it is not a mere echo; and the very novelty will challenge attention, and at last gain adherents if my views have any real insight. At any rate the point to be considered is this, that whether the novel views excite opposition or applause, the one condition of their success is that they be believed in by the propagator. The public can only be really moved by what is genuine. Even an error if believed in will have greater force than an insincere

truth. Lip-advocacy only rouses lip-homage. It is belief which gives momentum.

Nor is it any serious objection to what is here said, that insincerity and timid acquiescence in the opinion and tastes of the public do often gain applause and temporary success. Sanding the sugar is not immediately unprofitable. There is an unpleasant popularity given to falsehood in this world of ours; but we love the truth notwithstanding, and with a more enduring love. Who does not know what it is to listen to public speakers pouring forth expressions of hollow belief and sham enthusiasm, snatching at commonplaces with a fervour as of faith, emphasising insincerities as if to make up by emphasis what is wanting in feeling, all the while saying not only what they do not believe, but what the listeners *know* they do not believe, and what the listeners, though they roar assent, do not themselves believe — a turbulence of sham, the very noise of which stuns the conscience? Is such an orator really enviable, although thunders of applause may have greeted his efforts? Is that success, although the newspapers all over the kingdom may be reporting the speech? What influence remains when the noise of the shouts has died away? Whereas, if on the same occasion one man gave utterance to a sincere thought, even if it were not a very wise thought, although the silence of the public — perhaps its hisses — may have produced an impression of failure, yet there is success, for the thought will re-appear and mingle with the thoughts of men to be adopted or combated by them, and may perhaps in a few years mark out the speaker as a man better worth listening to than the noisy orator whose insincerity was so much cheered.

The same observation applies to books. An author who waits upon the times, and utters only what he thinks the world will like to hear, who sails with the stream, admiring everything which it is "correct taste" to admire, despising everything which has not yet received that Hallmark, sneering at the thoughts of a great thinker not yet accepted as such, and slavishly repeating the small phrases of a thinker who has gained renown, flippant and contemptuous towards opinions which he has not taken the trouble to understand, and never venturing to oppose even the errors of men in authority, such an author may indeed by dint of a certain dexterity in assorting the mere husks of opinion gain the applause of reviewers, who will call him a thinker, and of indolent men and women who will pronounce him "so clever"; but triumphs of this kind are like oratorical triumphs after dinner. Every autumn the earth is strewed with the dead leaves of such vernal successes.

iii. *Sincerity as Related to Vision*

I would not have the reader conclude that because I advocate plain-speaking even of unpopular views, I mean to imply that originality and sincerity are always in opposition to public opinion. There are many points both of doctrine and feeling in which the world is not likely to be wrong. But in all cases it is desirable that men should not pretend to believe opinions which they really reject, or express emotions they do not feel. And this rule is universal. Even truthful and modest men will sometimes violate the rule under the mistaken idea of being eloquent by means of the diction of eloquence. This is a source of bad Literature. There are certain

views in Religion, Ethics, and Politics, which readily lend themselves to eloquence, because eloquent men have written largely on them, and the temptation to secure this facile effect often seduces men to advocate these views, in preference to views they really see to be more rational. That this eloquence at second-hand is but feeble in its effect, does not restrain others from repeating it. Experience never seems to teach them that grand speech comes only from grand thoughts, passionate speech from passionate emotions. The pomp and roll of words, the trick of phrase, the rhythm and the gesture of an orator, may all be imitated, but not his eloquence. No man was ever eloquent by trying to be eloquent, but only by being so. Trying leads to the vice of "fine writing" — the plague-spot of Literature, not only unhealthy in itself, and vulgarising the grand language which should be reserved for great thoughts, but encouraging that tendency to select only those views upon which a spurious enthusiasm can most readily graft the representative abstractions and stirring suggestions which will move public applause. The "fine writer" will always prefer the opinion which is striking to the opinion which is true. He frames his sentences by the ear, and is only dissatisfied with them when their cadences are ill-distributed, or their diction is too familiar. It seldom occurs to him that a sentence should accurately express his meaning and no more; indeed there is not often a definite meaning to be expressed, for the thought which arose vanished while he tried to express it, and the sentence, instead of being determined by and moulded on a thought, is determined by some verbal suggestion. Open any book or periodical, and see how frequently the writer does not, cannot, mean what he

says; and you will observe that in general the defect does not arise from any poverty in our language, but from the habitual carelessness which allows expressions to be written down unchallenged provided they are sufficiently harmonious, and not glaringly inadequate.

The slapdash insincerity of modern style entirely sets at nought the first principle of writing, which is accuracy. The art of writing is not, as many seem to imagine, the art of bringing fine phrases into rhythmical order, but the art of placing before the reader intelligible symbols of the thoughts and feelings in the writer's mind. Endeavour to be faithful, and if there is any beauty in your thought, your style will be beautiful; if there is any real emotion to express, the expression will be moving. Never rouge your style. Trust to your native pallor rather than to cosmetics. Try to make us see what you see and to feel what you feel, and banish from your mind whatever phrases others may have used to express what was in their thoughts, but is not in yours. Have you never observed what a slight impression writers have produced, in spite of a profusion of images, antitheses, witty epigrams, and rolling periods, whereas some simpler style, altogether wanting in such "brilliant passage," has gained the attention and respect of thousands? Whatever is stuck on as ornament affects us as ornament; we do not think an old hag young and handsome because the jewels flash from her brow and bosom; if we envy her wealth, we do not admire her beauty.

What "fine writing" is to prosaists, insincere imagery is to poets: it is introduced for effect, not used as expression. To the real poet an image comes spontaneously, or if it comes as an afterthought, it is chosen because it expresses his meaning and helps to paint the picture which

is in his mind, not because it is beautiful in itself. It is a symbol, not an ornament. Whether the image rise slowly before the mind during the contemplation, or is seen in the same flash which discloses the picture, in each case it arises by natural association, and is *seen*, not *sought*. The inferior poet is dissatisfied with what he sees, and casts about in search after something more striking. He does not wait till an image is borne in upon the tide of memory, he seeks for an image that will be picturesque; and being without the delicate selective instinct which guides the fine artist, he generally chooses something which we feel to be not exactly in its right place. He thus —

> With gold and silver covers every part,
> And hides with ornament his want of art.
> [Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, lines 295–296.]

Be true to your own soul, and do not try to express the thought of another. "If some people," says Ruskin, "really see angels where others see only empty space, let them paint the angels: only let not anybody else think *he* can paint an angel too, on any calculated principles of the angelic."[1] Unhappily this is precisely what so many will attempt, inspired by the success of the angelic painter. Nor will the failure of others warn them.

Whatever is sincerely felt or believed, whatever forms part of the imaginative experience, and is not simply imitation or hearsay, may fitly be given to the world, and will always maintain an infinite superiority over imitative splendour; because although it by no means follows that whatever has formed part of the artist's experience must be impressive, or can do without artis-

[1] *Modern Painters*, IV, Chap. II, Sect. 2.

tic presentation, yet his artistic power will always be greater over his own material than over another's. Emerson has well remarked that "those facts, words, persons, which dwell in a man's memory without his being able to say why, remain, because they have a relation to him not less real for being as yet unapprehended. They are symbols of value to him, as they can interpret parts of his consciousness which he would vainly seek words for in the conventional images of books and other minds. What attracts my attention shall have it, as I will go to the man who knocks at my door, while a thousand persons, as worthy, go by it, to whom I give no regard. It is enough that these particulars speak to me. A few anecdotes, a few traits of character, manners, face, a few incidents have an emphasis in your memory out of all proportion to their apparent significance, if you measure them by the ordinary standards. They relate to your gift. Let them have their weight, and do not reject them, and cast about for illustrations and facts more usual in literature."[1]

In the notes to the last edition of his poems, Wordsworth specified the particular occasions which furnished him with particular images. It was the things he had *seen* which he put into his verses; and that is why they affect us. It matters little whether the poet draws his images directly from present experience, or indirectly from memory — whether the sight of the slow-sailing swan, that "floats double, swan and shadow"[2] be at once transferred to the scene of the poem he is writing, or come back to him in after years to complete some picture in his mind; enough that the image be suggested, and not sought.

[1] Essay on *Spiritual Laws.* [2] *Yarrow Unvisited.*

The sentence from Ruskin, quoted just now, will guard against the misconception that a writer, because told to rely on his own experience, is enjoined to forego the glory and delight of creation even of fantastic types. He is only told never to pretend to see what he has not seen. He is urged to follow Imagination in her most erratic course, though like a will-o'-wisp she lead over marsh and fen away from the haunts of mortals; but not to pretend that he is following a will-o'-wisp when his vagrant fancy never was allured by one. It is idle to paint fairies and goblins unless you have a genuine vision of them which forces you to paint them. They are poetical objects, but only to poetic minds. "Be a plain topographer if you possibly can," says Ruskin, "if Nature meant you to be anything else, she will force you to it; but never try to be a prophet; go on quietly with your hard camp-work, and the spirit will come to you in the camp, as it did to Eldad and Medad, if you are appointed to have it."[1] Yes: if you are appointed to have it; if your faculties are such that this high success is possible, it will come, provided the faculties are employed with sincerity. Otherwise it cannot come. No insincere effort can secure it.

If the advice I give to reject every insincerity in writing seem cruel, because it robs the writer of so many of his effects — if it seem disheartening to earnestly warn a man not to *try* to be eloquent, but only to *be* eloquent when his thoughts move with an impassioned *largo* — if throwing a writer back upon his naked faculty seem especially distasteful to those who have a painful misgiving that their faculty is small, and that the uttermost of their own power would be far from impressive, my

[1] *Modern Painters*, IV, Chap. II, Sect. 4.

answer is that I have no hope of dissuading feeble writers from the practice of insincerity, but as under no circumstances can they become good writers and achieve success, my analysis has no reference to them, my advice has no aim at them.

It is to the young and strong, to the ambitious and the earnest, that my words are addressed. It is to wipe the film from their eyes, and make them see, as they will see directly the truth is placed before them, how easily we are all seduced into greater or less insincerity of thought, of feeling, and of style, either by reliance on other writers, from whom we catch the trick of thought and turn of phrase, or from some preconceived view of what the public will prefer. It is to the young and strong I say: Watch vigilantly every phrase you write, and assure yourself that it expresses what you mean; watch vigilantly every thought you express, and assure yourself that it is yours, not another's; you may share it with another, but you must not adopt it from him for the nonce. Of course, if you are writing humourously or dramatically, you will not be expected to write your own serious opinions. Humour may take its utmost licence, yet be sincere. The dramatic genius may incarnate itself in a hundred shapes, yet in each it will speak what it feels to be the truth. If you are imaginatively representing the feelings of another, as in some playful exaggeration or some dramatic personation, the truth required of you is imaginative truth, not your personal views and feelings. But when you write in your own person you must be rigidly veracious, neither pretending to admire what you do not admire, or to despise what in secret you rather like, nor surcharging your admiration and enthusiasm to bring you into unison with the public chorus.

This vigilance may render Literature more laborious; but no one ever supposed that success was to be had on easy terms; and if you only write one sincere page where you might have written twenty insincere pages, the one page is worth writing — it is Literature.

Sincerity is not only effective and honourable, it is also much less difficult than is commonly supposed. To take a trifling example: If for some reason I cannot, or do not, choose to verify a quotation which may be useful to my purpose, what is to prevent my saying that the quotation is taken at second-hand? It is true, if my quotations are for the most part second-hand and are acknowledged as such, my erudition will appear scanty. But it will only appear what it is. Why should I pretend to an erudition which is not mine? Sincerity forbids it. Prudence whispers that the pretence is, after all, vain, because those, and those alone, who can rightly estimate erudition will infallibly detect my pretence, whereas those whom I have deceived were not worth deceiving. Yet in spite of Sincerity and Prudence, how shamelessly men compile second-hand references, and display in borrowed foot-notes a pretence of labour and of accuracy! I mention this merely to show how, even in the humbler class of compilers, the Principle of Sincerity may find fit illustrations, and how honest work, even in references, belongs to the same category as honest work in philosophy or poetry.

THE CARDINAL RULES OF RHETORIC[1]

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

1803–1882

This passage from Emerson is a part of his incomplete essay entitled "Art and Criticism." The essay was originally delivered as "the fourth lecture in a course given in the spring of 1859, at the Freeman Place Chapel in Boston."

Many readers of Emerson who are amazed at the ease with which the popular mind is able to grasp his lofty conceptions will find in this essay an adequate explanation. He sought the sturdy, living vocabulary of the unsophisticated middle-classes. Dr. Edward Waldo Emerson, in commenting upon his father's preference for homely strength in language, remarks: "His hearers at the church in East Lexington were simple, but in confessing this, they said they could understand Mr. Emerson. Most of his lectures for forty years thereafter were 'tried on,' as he said, on audiences from farm and shop in the lyceums of New England towns or on enterprising but uncultivated settlers of 'the West.' He would not 'talk down,' but made it his business to try to give them his best thought in vigorous, simple words, with homely illustration or classic anecdote."

LITERATURE is but a poor trick, you will say, when it busies itself to make words pass for things; and yet I am far from thinking this subordinate service unimportant. The secondary services of literature may be classed under the name of Rhetoric, and are quite as important in letters as iron is in war. An enumeration of the few principal weapons of the poet or writer will at once suggest their value.

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Writing is the greatest of arts, the subtilest, and of most miraculous effect; and to it the education is costliest. On the writer the choicest influences are concentrated, — nothing that does not go to his costly equipment: a war, an earthquake, revival of letters, the new dispensation by Jesus, or by Angels; Heaven, Hell, power, science, the *Nêant*, exist to him as colors for his brush.

In this art modern society has introduced a new element, by introducing a new audience. The decline of the privileged orders, all over the world; the advance of the Third Estate; the transformation of the laborer into reader and writer has compelled the learned and the thinkers to address them. Chiefly in this country, the common school has added two or three audiences; once, we had only the boxes; now, the galleries and the pit.

There is, in every nation, a style which never becomes obsolete, a certain mode of phraseology so consonant and congenial to the analogy and principles of its respective language as to remain settled and unaltered. This style is probably to be sought in the common intercourse of life, among those who speak only to be understood, without ambition of elegance. The polite are always catching modish innovations, and the learned depart from established forms of speech, in hope of finding or making better; those who wish for distinction forsake the vulgar, when the vulgar is right; but there is a conversation above grossness and below refinement where prosperity resides, and where Shakspeare seems to have gathered his comic dialogue. Goethe valued himself not on his learning or eccentric flights, but that he knew how to write German. And many of his poems

are so idiomatic, so strongly rooted in the German soil, that they are the terror of translators, who say they cannot be rendered into any other language without loss of vigor, as we say of any darling passage of our own masters. "Le style c'est l'homme," said Buffon; and Goethe said, "Poetry here, poetry there, I have learned to speak German." And when I read of various extraordinary polyglots, self-made or college-made, who can understand fifty languages, I answer that I shall be glad and surprised to find that they know one. For if I were asked how many masters of English idiom I know, I shall be perplexed to count five.

Ought not the scholar to convey his meaning in terms as short and strong as the smith and the drover use to convey theirs? You know the history of the eminent English writer on gypsies, George Borrow; he had one clear perception, that the key to every country was command of the language of the common people. He therefore mastered the *patois* of the gypsies, called Romany, which is spoken by them in all countries where they wander, in Europe, Asia, Africa. Yet much of the raw material of the street-talk is absolutely untranslatable into print, and one must learn from Burke how to be severe without being unparliamentary. Rabelais and Montaigne are masters of this Romany, but cannot be read aloud, and so far fall short. Whitman is our American master, but has not got out of the Fire-Club and gained the *entrée* of the sitting-rooms. Bacon, if "he could out-cant a London chirurgeon," must have possessed the Romany under his brocade robes. Luther said, "I preach coarsely; that giveth content to all. Hebrew, Greek and Latin I spare, until we learned ones come together, and then we make it so curled and finical that

God himself wondereth at us." He who would be powerful must have the terrible gift of familiarity,— Mirabeau, Chatham, Fox, Burke, O'Connell, Patrick Henry; and among writers, Swift, DeFoe and Carlyle.

Look at this forlorn caravan of travellers who wander over Europe dumb — never exchange a word, in the mother tongue of either, with prince or peasant; but condemned to the company of a courier and of the padrone when they cannot take refuge in the society of countrymen. A well-chosen series of stereoscopic views would have served a better purpose, which they can explore at home, sauced with joyful discourse and with reference to all the books in your library.

Speak with the vulgar, think with the wise. See how Plato managed it, with an imagination so gorgeous, and a taste so patrician, that Jove, if he descended, was to speak in his style. Into the exquisite refinement of his Academy, he introduces the low-born Socrates, relieving the purple diction by his perverse talk, his gallipots, and cook, and trencher, and cart-wheels — and steadily kept this coarseness to flavor a dish else too luscious. Everybody knows the points in which the mob has the advantage of the Academy, and all able men have known how to import the petulance of the street into correct discourse.

The next virtue of rhetoric is compression, the science of omitting, which makes good the old verse of Hesiod, "Fools, they did not know that half was better than the whole." The French have a neat phrase, that the secret of boring you is that of telling all, — "Le secret d'ennuyer est celui de tout dire"; which we translate short, "Touch and go." The silences, pauses, of an orator are as telling as his words. What the poet omits exalts every

syllable that he writes.[1] In good hands it will never become sterility. A good writer must convey the feeling of a flamboyant witness, and at the same time of chemic selection — as if in his densest period was no cramp, but room to turn a chariot and horses between his valid words. There is hardly danger in America of excess of condensation; there must be no cramp insufficiency, but the superfluous must be omitted. In the Hindoo mythology, "Viswaharmán" placed the sun on his lathe to grind off some of his effulgence, and in this manner reduced it to an eighth — more was inseparable. . . .

In architecture the beauty is increased in the degree in which the material is safely diminished; as when you break up a prose wall, and leave all the strength in the poetry of columns. As soon as you read aloud, you will find what sentences drag. Blot them out, and read again, you will find the words that drag. 'T is like a pebble inserted in a mosaic. Resolute blotting rids you of all those phrases that sound like something and mean nothing, with which scriptural forms play a large part. Never say, "I beg not to be misunderstood." It is only graceful in the case when you are afraid that what is called a better meaning will be taken, and you wish to insist on a worse; a man has a right to pass, like Dean Swift, for a worse man than he is, but not for a better.

And I sometimes wish that the Board of Education might carry out the project of a college for graduates of our universities, to which editors and members of Con-

[1] Walt Whitman in one of his prose jottings has this: "At its best, poetic lore is like what may be heard of conversation in the dusk, from speakers far or hid, of which we get only a few broken murmurs. What is not gathered is far more — perhaps the main thing." — *Editor.*

gress and writers of books might repair, and learn to sink what we could best spare of our words; to gazette those Americanisms which offend us in all journals. Some of these are odious. *Some* as an adverb — "reeled some"; *considerable* as an adverb for *much;* "quite a number"; *slim* for *bad;* the adjective *graphic*, which means *what is written* — graphic arts and oral arts, arts of writing, and arts of speech and song — but is used as if it meant *descriptive:* "Minerva's graphic thread." A Mr. Randall, M.C., who appeared before the committee of the House of Commons on the subject of the American mode of closing a debate, said, "that the one-hour rule worked well; made the debate short and graphic." 'T is the worst praise you can give a speech that it is as if written.

. . . . . .

But these cardinal rules of rhetoric find best examples in the great masters, and are main sources of the delight they give. Shakspeare might be studied for his dexterity in the use of these weapons, if it were not for his heroic strength. There is no such master of low style as he, and therefore none can securely soar so high. I do not mean that he delights in comedy, exults in bringing the street itself, uproarious with laughter and animal joy, on to the scene, with Falstaff and Touchstone and Trinculo and the fools; but that in the conduct of the play, and the speech of the heroes, he keeps the level tone which is the tone of high and low alike, and most widely understood. A man of experience altogether, his very sonnets are as solid and close to facts as the Banker's Gazette; and the only check on the detail of each of his portraits is his own universality, which made bias or fixed ideas impossible — his impartiality is like a sunbeam.

His fun is as wise as his earnest, its foundations are below the frost. His muse is moral simply from its depth, and I value the intermixture of the common and the transcendental as in Nature. One would say Shakspeare must have been a thousand years old when he wrote his first piece; so thoroughly is his thought familiar to him, so solidly worded, as if it were already a proverb, and not only hereafter to become one. Well, that millennium is really only a little acceleration in his process of thought; his loom is better toothed, cranked and pedalled than other people's, and he can turn off a hundred yards to their one. Shakspeare is nothing but a large utterance. We cannot find that anything in his age was more worth expression than anything in ours; nor give any account of his existence, but only the fact that there was a wonderful symbolizer and expressor, who has no rival in all ages and who has thrown an accidental lustre over his time and subject.

My friend thinks the reason why the French mind is so shallow, and still to seek, running into vagaries and blind alleys, is because they do not read Shakspeare; whilst the English and Germans, who read Shakspeare and the Bible, have a great onward march. Shakspeare would have sufficed for the culture of a nation for vast periods. The Chinese have got on so long with their solitary Confucius and Mencius; the Arabs with their Mahomet; the Scandinavians with their Snorre Sturleson; and if the English island had been larger and the Straits of Dover wider, to keep it at pleasure a little out of the imbroglio of Europe, they might have managed to feed on Shakspeare for some ages yet; as the camel in the desert is fed by his humps, in long absence from food.

Montaigne must have the credit of giving to literature that which we listen for in bar-rooms, the low speech, — words and phrases that no scholar coined; street-cries and war-cries; words of the boatman, the farmer and the lord; that have neatness and necessity, through their use in the vocabulary of work and appetite, like the pebbles which the incessant attrition of the sea has rounded. Every historic autobiographic trait authenticating the man adds to the value of the book. We can't afford to take the horse out of the Essays; it would take the rider too.

Herrick is a remarkable example of the low style. He is, therefore, a good example of the modernness of an old English writer. So Latimer, so Chaucer, so the Bible. He found his subject where he stood, between his feet, in his house, pantry, barn, poultry-yard, in his village, neighbors' gossip and scandal. Like Montaigne in this, that his subject cost him nothing, and he knew what he spake of, and did not write up to it, but could write down (a main secret), and took his level, so that he had all his strength, the easiness of strength; he took what he knew, and "took it easy," as we say. The Germans praise in Goethe the comfortable stoutness. Herrick's merit is the simplicity and manliness of his utterance, and, rarely, the weight of his sentence. He has, and knows that he has, a noble, idiomatic English, a perfect, plain style, from which he can soar to a fine, lyric delicacy, or descend to coarsest sarcasm, without losing his firm footing. This flower of speech is accompanied with an assurance of fame. We have an artist who in this merit of which I speak will easily cope with these celebrities.

In Carlyle as in Byron one is more struck with the rhetoric than with the matter. He has manly superiority rather than intellectuality, and so makes hard hits all the time. There's more character than intellect in every sentence — herein strongly resembling Samuel Johnson. The best service Carlyle has rendered is to rhetoric, or art of writing. In his books the vicious conventions of writing are all dropped. You have no board interposed between you and the writer's mind, but he talks flexibly, now high, now low, in loud emphasis, in undertones, then laughs till the walls ring, then calmly moderates, then hints, or raises an eyebrow. He has gone nigher to the wind than any other craft.

Carlyle, with his inimitable ways of saying the thing, is next best to the inventor of the thing, and I think of him when I read the famous inscription on the pyramid, "I King Saib built this pyramid. I, when I had built it, covered it with satin. Let him who cometh after me, and says he is equal to me, cover it with mats." What he has said shall be proverb, nobody shall be able to say it otherwise. No book can any longer be tolerable in the old husky Neal-on-the-Puritans model. In short, I think the revolution wrought by Carlyle is precisely parallel to that going forward in picture, by the stereoscope. Until history is interesting, it is not yet written.

Here has come into the country, three months ago, a History of Friedrich, infinitely the wittiest book that ever was written; a book that, one would think, the English people would rise up in a mass to thank him for, by cordial acclamation, and signify, by crowning him with chaplet of oak-leaves, their joy that such a head existed among them, and sympathizing and much-reading

America would make a new treaty or send a minister extraordinary to offer congratulations of honoring delight to England in acknowledgment of such a donation; a book holding so many memorable and heroic facts, working directly on practice; with new heroes, things unvoiced before — the German Plutarch, now that we have exhausted the Greek and Roman and British biography — with a range, too, of thought and wisdom, so large, so colloquially elastic, that we not so much read a stereotype page as we see the eyes of the writer looking into ours, whilst he is humming and chuckling, with undertones, and trumpet-tones, and shrugs, and long commanding glances, stereoscoping every figure that passes, and every hill, river, wood, hummock and pebble in the long perspective, with its wonderful mnemonics, whereby great and insignificant men are ineffaceably marked and medalled in the memory by what they were, had and did; and withal a book that is a judgment-day for its moral verdict on the men and nations and manners of modern times. And this book makes no noise. I have hardly seen a notice of it in any newspaper or journal, and you would think there was no such book. I am not aware that Mr. Buchanan has sent a special messenger to Great Cheyne Row, Chelsea; but the secret interior wits and hearts of men take note of it, not the less surely. They have said nothing lately in praise of the air, or of fire, or of the blessing of love, and yet, I suppose, they are sensible of these, and not less of this Book, which is like these.

After Low Style and Compression what the books call *Metonymy* is a principal power of rhetoric. It means, using one work or image for another. It is a low idealism. Idealism regards the world as symbolic, and all

these symbols or forms as fugitive and convertible expressions. The power of the poet is in controlling these symbols; in using every fact in Nature, however great and stable, as a fluent symbol, and in measuring his strength by the facility with which he makes the mood of mind give its color to things. The world, history, the powers of Nature, — he can make them speak what sense he will.

All conversation, as all literature, appears to me the pleasure of rhetoric, or, I may say, of *metonymy*. "To make of motes mountains, and of mountains motes," Isocrates said, "was the orator's office." Well, that is what poetry and thinking do. Whatever new object we see, we perceive to be only a new version of our familiar experience, and we set about translating it at once into our parallel facts. We have hereby our vocabulary.

Everything has two handles. Pindar when the victor in a race by mules offered him a trifling present, pretended to be hurt at thought of writing on demi-asses. When, however, he offered a sufficient present, he composed the poem: —

> Hail, daughters of the tempest-footed horse,
> That skims like wind along the course.

That was the other handle. I passed at one time through a place called New City, then supposed, like each of a hundred others, to be destined to greatness. I fell in with one of the founders who showed its advantages and its river and port and the capabilities: "Sixty houses, sir, were built in a night, like tents." After Chicago had secured the confluence of the railroads to itself, I chanced to meet my founder again, but now re-

moved to Chicago. He had transferred to that city the magnificent dreams which he had once communicated to me, and no longer remembered his first emporium. "Where is the town? Was there not," I asked, "a river and a harbor there?" "Oh yes, there was a guzzle out of a sand-bank." "And the town?" "There are still the sixty houses, but when I passed it, one owl was the only inhabitant." When Samuel Dexter, long since, argued the claims of South Boston Bridge, he had to meet loud complaints of the shutting out of the coasting-trade by the proposed improvements. "Now," said he, "I come to the grand charge that we have obstructed the commerce and navigation of Roxbury Ditch." 'T is very easy to call the gracious spring "poor goody herb-wife," or to represent the farm, which stands for the organization of the gravest needs, as a poor trifle of pea-vines, turnips and hen-roosts. Everything has two handles. Shakspeare says, "A plague of opinion; a man can wear it on both sides, like a leather jerkin."

Here is my friend E., the model of opinionists. He is the April day incarnated and walking, soft sunshine and hailstones, sour east wind and flowery southwest — alternating, and each sovereign, and painting all things its own color. He has it all his own way. He complains of Nature, — too many leaves, too windy and grassy, and I suppose the birds are too feathery and the horses too leggy. He thinks Egypt a humbug, and Palestine used up, and England a flash in the pan; and that the only art is landscape-painting. But when we came, in the woods, to a clump of goldenrod, — "Ah!" he says, "here they are! these things consume a great deal of time. I don't know but they are of more importance than any other of our investments." Well, this is the

game that goes on every day in all companies; this is the ball that is tossed in every court of law, in every legislature and in literature, and in the history of every mind by sovereignty of thought to make facts and men obey our present humor or belief.

THE PRINCIPLE OF ECONOMY APPLIED TO WORDS

HERBERT SPENCER

1820–1903

THE following pages from Spencer constitute the first and probably the most important section of his essay on "The Philosophy of Style," which was originally published in the *Westminster Review*, October, 1852. Since then the entire essay has been reprinted frequently. Professor F. N. Scott has edited it for classroom use (Allyn and Bacon, Boston).

Spencer insisted that his Principle of Economy was the result of his own unhampered thinking; but there is evidence to show that his work was not so wholly independent of other writers on the subject as he would have one believe. He borrowed somewhat freely — even from the very rhetoricians whose work he lamented as being unorganized. (See, for example, Mr. George B. Denton's article on "Herbert Spencer and the Rhetoricians" in the *Publications* of the Modern Language Association of America, March, 1919.) In spite of the fact, however, that he was not quite so independent of the influence of others as he professed to be, he formulated a principle that had hitherto been incompletely or imperfectly expressed.

COMMENTING on the seeming incongruity between his father's argumentative powers and his ignorance of formal logic, Tristram Shandy says: "It was a matter of just wonder with my worthy tutor, and two or three fellows of that learned society, that a man who knew not so much as the names of his tools, should be able to work after that fashion with them." Sterne's intended implication that a knowledge of the principles of reasoning neither makes, nor is essential to, a good reasoner, is doubtless true. Thus, too, is it with grammar. As Dr.

Latham, condemning the usual school-drill in Lindley Murray, rightly remarks: "Gross vulgarity is a fault to be prevented; but the proper prevention is to be got from habit — not rules." Similarly, there can be little question that good composition is far less dependent upon acquaintance with its laws, than upon practice and natural aptitude. A clear head, a quick imagination, and a sensitive ear, will go far towards making all rhetorical precepts needless. He who daily hears and reads well-framed sentences, will naturally more or less tend to use similar ones. And where there exists any mental idiosyncrasy — where there is a deficient verbal memory, or an inadequate sense of logical dependence, or but little perception of order, or a lack of constructive ingenuity — no amount of instruction will remedy the defect. Nevertheless, *some* practical result may be expected from a familiarity with the principles of style. The endeavor to conform to laws may tell, though slowly. And if in no other way, yet, as facilitating revision, a knowledge of the thing to be achieved — a clear idea of what constitutes a beauty, and what a blemish — cannot fail to be of service.

No general theory of expression seems yet to have been enunciated. The maxims contained in works on composition and rhetoric, are presented in an unorganized form. Standing as isolated dogmas — as empirical generalizations, they are neither so clearly apprehended, nor so much respected, as they would be were they deduced from some simple first principle. We are told that "brevity is the soul of wit." We hear styles condemned as verbose or involved. Blair says that every needless part of a sentence "interrupts the description and clogs the image"; and again, that "long

sentences fatigue the reader's attention." It is remarked by Lord Kaimes, that "to give the utmost force to a period, it ought, if possible, to be closed with that word which makes the greatest figure." That parentheses should be avoided and that Saxon words should be used in preference to those of Latin origin, are established precepts. But, however influential the truths thus dogmatically embodied, they would be much more influential if reduced to something like scientific ordination. In this, as in other cases, conviction will be greatly strengthened when we understand the *why*. And we may be sure that a comprehension of the general principle from which the rules of composition result, will not only bring them home to us with greater force, but will discover to us other rules of like origin.

On seeking for some clue to the law underlying these current maxims, we may see shadowed forth in many of them, the importance of economizing the reader's or hearer's attention. To so present ideas that they may be apprehended with the least possible mental effort, is the desideratum towards which most of the rules above quoted point. When we condemn writing that is wordy, or confused, or intricate — when we praise this style as easy, and blame that as fatiguing, we consciously or unconsciously assume this desideratum as our standard of judgment. Regarding language as an apparatus of symbols for the conveyance of thought, we may say that, as in a mechanical apparatus, the more simple and the better arranged its parts, the greater will be the effect produced. In either case, whatever force is absorbed by the machine is deducted from the result. A reader or listener has at each moment but a limited amount of mental power available. To recognize and interpret the

symbols presented to him, requires part of this power; to arrange and combine the images suggested requires a further part; and only that part which remains can be used for realizing the thought conveyed. Hence, the more time and attention it takes to receive and understand each sentence, the less time and attention can be given to the contained idea; and the less vividly will that idea be conceived.

How truly language must be regarded as a hindrance to thought, though the necessary instrument of it, we shall clearly perceive on remembering the comparative force with which simple ideas are communicated by signs. To say, "Leave the room," is less expressive than to point to the door. Placing a finger on the lips is more forcible than whispering, "Do not speak." A beck of the hand is better than, "Come here." No phrase can convey the idea of surprise so vividly as opening the eyes and raising the eyebrows. A shrug of the shoulders would lose much by translation into words. Again, it may be remarked that when oral language is employed, the strongest effects are produced by interjections, which condense entire sentences into syllables. And in other cases, where custom allows us to express thoughts by single words, as in *Beware*, *Heigho*, *Fudge*, much force would be lost by expanding them into specific propositions. Hence, carrying out the metaphor that language is the vehicle of thought, there seems reason to think that in all cases the friction and inertia of the vehicle deduct from its efficiency; and that in composition, the chief, if not the sole, thing to be done is to reduce this friction and inertia to the smallest possible amount. Let us then inquire whether economy of the recipient's attention is not the secret of effect, alike in the right

choice and collocation of words, in the best arrangement of clauses in a sentence, in the proper order of its principal and subordinate propositions, in the judicious use of simile, metaphor, and other figures of speech, and even in the rhythmical sequence of syllables.

The greater forcibleness of Saxon English, or rather non-Latin English, first claims our attention.[1] The several special reasons assignable for this may all be reduced to the general reason — economy. The most important of them is early association. A child's vocabulary is almost wholly Saxon. He says, *I have*, not *I possess* — *I wish*, not *I desire;* he does not *reflect*, he *thinks;* he does not beg for *amusement*, but for *play;* he calls things *nice* or *nasty*, not *pleasant* or *disagreeable*. The synonyms which he learns in after years, never become so closely, so organically connected with the ideas signified, as do these original words used in childhood; and hence the association remains less strong. But in what does a strong association between a word and an idea differ from a weak one? Simply in the greater ease and rapidity of the suggestive action. It can be in nothing else. Both of two words, if they be strictly synonymous, eventually call up the same image. The expression — It is *acid*, must in the end give rise to the same thought as — It is *sour;* but because the term *acid* was learnt later in life, and has not been so often followed by the thought symbolized, it does not so readily arouse that thought as the term *sour*. If we remember how slowly and with what labor the appropriate ideas follow unfamiliar words in another language, and how increasing familiarity with such words brings greater rapidity

[1] Of course we now know that the inferiority of "Latin English" has been greatly exaggerated. — *Editor.*

and ease of comprehension; and if we consider that the same process must have gone on with the words of our mother tongue from childhood upwards, we shall clearly see that the earliest learnt and oftenest used words, will, other things equal, call up images with less loss of time and energy than their later learnt synonyms.

The further superiority possessed by Saxon English in its comparative brevity, obviously comes under the same generalization. If it be an advantage to express an idea in the smallest number of words, then will it be an advantage to express it in the smallest number of syllables. If circuitous phrases and needless expletives distract the attention and diminish the strength of the impression produced, then do surplus articulations do so. A certain effort, though commonly an inappreciable one, must be required to recognize every vowel and consonant. If, as all know, it is tiresome to listen to an indistinct speaker, or read a badly written manuscript; and if, as we cannot doubt, the fatigue is a cumulative result of the attention needed to catch successive syllables; it follows that attention is in such cases absorbed by each syllable. And if this be true when the syllables are difficult of recognition, it will also be true, though in a less degree, when the recognition of them is easy. Hence, the shortness of Saxon words becomes a reason for their greater force. One qualification, however, must not be overlooked. A word which in itself embodies the most important part of the idea to be conveyed, especially when that idea is an emotional one, may often with advantage be a polysyllabic word. Thus it seems more forcible to say, "It is *magnificent*," than "It is *grand*." The word *vast* is not so powerful a one as *stupendous*. Calling a thing *nasty* is not so effective as calling it *disgusting*.

There seem to be several causes for this exceptional superiority of certain long words. We may ascribe it partly to the fact that a voluminous, mouth-filling epithet is, by its very size, suggestive of largeness or strength; witness the immense pomposity of sesquipedalian verbiage: and when great power or intensity has to be suggested, this association of ideas aids the effect. A further cause may be that a word of several syllables admits of more emphatic articulation; and as emphatic articulation is a sign of emotion, the unusual impressiveness of the thing named is implied by it. Yet another cause is that a long word (of which the latter syllables are generally inferred as soon as the first are spoken) allows the hearer's consciousness a longer time to dwell upon the quality predicated; and where, as in the above cases, it is to this predicated quality that the entire attention is called, an advantage results from keeping it before the mind for an appreciable time. The reasons which we have given for preferring short words evidently do not hold here. So that to make our generalization quite correct we must say, that while in certain sentences expressing strong feeling, the word which more especially implies that feeling may often with advantage be a many-syllabled or Latin one; in the immense majority of cases, each word serving but as a step to the idea embodied by the whole sentence, should, if possible, be a one-syllabled or Saxon one.

Once more, that frequent cause of strength in Saxon and other primitive words — their imitative character, may be similarly resolved into the more general cause. Both those directly imitative, as *splash*, *bang*, *whiz*, *roar*, &c., and those analogically imitative, as *rough*, *smooth*, *keen*, *blunt*, *thin*, *hard*, *crag*, &c., have a greater or less

likeness to the things symbolized; and by making on the senses impressions allied to the ideas to be called up, they save part of the effort needed to call up such ideas, and leave more attention for the ideas themselves.

The economy of the recipient's mental energy, into which are thus resolvable the several causes of the strength of Saxon English, may equally be traced in the superiority of specific over generic words. That concrete terms produce more vivid impressions than abstract ones, and should, when possible, be used instead, is a current maxim of composition. As Dr. Campbell says, "The more general the terms are, the picture is the fainter; the more special they are, 'tis the brighter." We should avoid such a sentence as:

> In proportion as the manners, customs, and amusements of a nation are cruel and barbarous, the regulations of their penal code will be severe.

And in place of it we should write:

> In proportion as men delight in battles, bull-fights, and combats of gladiators, will they punish by hanging, burning, and the rack.

This superiority of specific expressions is clearly due to a saving of the effort required to translate words into thoughts. As we do not think in generals but in particulars—as, whenever any class of things is referred to, we represent it to ourselves by calling to mind individual members of it; it follows that when an abstract word is used, the hearer or reader has to choose from his stock of images, one or more, by which he may figure to himself the genus mentioned. In doing this, some delay must arise — some force be expended; and if, by employing a specific term, an appropriate image can be at

once suggested, an economy is achieved, and a more vivid impression produced.

Turning now from the choice of words to their sequence, we shall find the same general principle hold good. We have *a priori* reasons for believing that in every sentence there is some one order of words more effective than any other; and that this order is the one which presents the elements of the proposition in the succession in which they may be most readily put together. As in a narrative, the events should be stated in such sequence that the mind may not have to go backwards and forwards in order to rightly connect them; as in a group of sentences, the arrangement should be such, that each of them may be understood as it comes, without waiting for subsequent ones; so in every sentence, the sequence of words should be that which suggests the constituents of the thought in the order most convenient for the building up that thought. Duly to enforce this truth, and to prepare the way for applications of it, we must briefly inquire into the mental act by which the meaning of a series of words is apprehended.

We cannot more simply do this than by considering the proper collocation of the substantive and adjective. Is it better to place the adjective before the substantive, or the substantive before the adjective? Ought we to say with the French — *un cheval noir;* or to say as we do — a black horse? Probably, most persons of culture would decide that one order is as good as the other. Alive to the bias produced by habit, they would ascribe to that the preference they feel for our own form of expression. They would expect those educated in the use of the opposite form to have an equal preference for

that. And thus they would conclude that neither of these instinctive judgments is of any worth. There is, however, a philosophical ground for deciding in favor of the English custom. If "a horse black" be the arrangement, immediately on the utterance of the word "horse," there arises, or tends to arise, in the mind, a picture answering to that word; and as there has been nothing to indicate what *kind* of horse, any image of a horse suggests itself. Very likely, however, the image will be that of a brown horse, brown horses being the most familiar. The result is that when the word "black" is added, a check is given to the process of thought. Either the picture of a brown horse already present to the imagination has to be suppressed, and the picture of a black one summoned in its place; or else, if the picture of a brown horse be yet unformed, the tendency to form it has to be stopped. Whichever is the case, a certain amount of hindrance results. But if, on the other hand, "a black horse" be the expression used, no such mistake can be made. The word "black," indicating an abstract quality, arouses no definite idea. It simply prepares the mind for conceiving some object of that color; and the attention is kept suspended until that object is known. If, then, by the precedence of the adjective, the idea is conveyed without liability to error, whereas the precedence of the substantive is apt to produce a misconception, it follows that the one gives the mind less trouble than the other, and is therefore more forcible.

Possibly it will be objected that the adjective and substantive come so close together, that practically they may be considered as uttered at the same moment; and that on hearing the phrase "a horse black," there is not time to imagine a wrongly-colored horse before the word

"black" follows to prevent it. It must be owned that it is not easy to decide by introspection whether this is so or not. But there are facts collaterally implying that it is not. Our ability to anticipate the words yet unspoken is one of them. If the ideas of the hearer kept considerably behind the expressions of the speaker, as the objection assumes, he could hardly foresee the end of a sentence by the time it was half delivered: yet this constantly happens. Were the supposition true, the mind, instead of anticipating, would be continually falling more and more in arrear. If the meanings of words are not realized as fast as the words are uttered, then the loss of time over each word must entail such an accumulation of delays as to leave a hearer entirely behind. But whether the force of these replies be or be not admitted, it will scarcely be denied that the right formation of a picture will be facilitated by presenting its elements in the order in which they are wanted; even though the mind should do nothing until it has received them all.

What is here said respecting the succession of the adjective and substantive is obviously applicable, by change of terms, to the adverb and verb. And without further explanation, it will be manifest, that in the use of prepositions and other particles, most languages spontaneously conform with more or less completeness to this law.

On applying a like analysis to the larger divisions of a sentence, we find not only that the same principle holds good, but that the advantage of respecting it becomes marked. In the arrangement of predicate and subject, for example, we are at once shown that as the predicate determines the aspect under which the subject is to be conceived, it should be placed first; and the striking ef-

fect produced by so placing it becomes comprehensible. Take the often-quoted contrast between "Great is Diana of the Ephesians," and "Diana of the Ephesians is great." When the first arrangement is used, the utterance of the word "great" arouses those vague associations of an impressive nature with which it has been habitually connected; the imagination is prepared to clothe with high attributes whatever follows; and when the words "Diana of the Ephesians" are heard, all the appropriate imagery which can, on the instant, be summoned, is used in the formation of the picture: the mind being thus led directly, and without error, to the intended impression. When, on the contrary, the reverse order is followed, the idea "Diana of the Ephesians" is conceived with no special reference to greatness; and when the words "is great" are added, the conception has to be remodelled: whence arises a loss of mental energy, and a corresponding diminution of effect. The following verse from Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," though somewhat irregular in structure, well illustrates the same truth:

> *Alone, alone, all, all alone,*
> *Alone on a wide wide sea!*
> And never a saint took pity on
> My soul in agony.

Of course the principle equally applies when the predicate is a verb or a participle. And as effect is gained by placing first all words indicating the quality, conduct, or condition of the subject, it follows that the copula also should have precedence. It is true that the general habit of our language resists this arrangement of predicate, copula, and subject; but we may readily find instances

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of the additional force gained by conforming to it. Thus, in the line from "Julius Cæsar" —

Then *burst* his mighty heart,

priority is given to a word embodying both predicate and copula. In a passage contained in "The Battle of Flodden Field," the like order is systematically employed with great effect:

The Border slogan rent the sky!
A home! a Gordon! was the cry;
Loud were the clanging blows:
Advanced, — forced back, — now low, now high,
The pennon sunk and rose;
As *bends* the bark's mast in the gale
When *rent are* rigging, shrouds, and sail,
It wavered 'mid the foes.

Pursuing the principle yet further, it is obvious that for producing the greatest effect, not only should the main divisions of a sentence observe this sequence, but the subdivisions of these should be similarly arranged. In nearly all cases, the predicate is accompanied by some limit or qualification called its complement. Commonly, also, the circumstances of the subject, which form its complement, have to be specified. And as these qualifications and circumstances must determine the mode in which the acts and things they belong to are conceived, precedence should be given to them. Lord Kaimes notices the fact that this order is preferable; though without giving the reason. He says: — "When a circumstance is placed at the beginning of the period, or near the beginning, the transition from it to the principal subject is agreeable: it is like ascending or going upward." A sentence arranged in illustration of this will be desirable. Here is one:

Whatever it may be in theory, it is clear that in practice the French idea of liberty is — the right of every man to be master of the rest.

In this case, were the first two clauses, up to the word "practice" inclusive, which qualify the subject, to be placed at the end instead of the beginning, much of the force would be lost; as thus:

The French idea of liberty is — the right of every man to be master of the rest; in practice at least, if not in theory.

Similarly, with respect to the conditions under which any fact is predicated. Observe in the following example the effect of putting them last:

How immense would be the stimulus to progress, were the honor now given to wealth and title given exclusively to high achievements and intrinsic worth!

And then observe the superior effect of putting them first:

Were the honor now given to wealth and title given exclusively to high achievements and intrinsic worth, how immense would be the stimulus to progress!

The effect of giving priority to the complement of the predicate, as well as the predicate itself, is finely displayed in the opening of "Hyperion":

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
Sat gray-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone.

Here it will be observed, not only that the predicate "sat" precedes the subject "Saturn," and that the three lines in italics, constituting the complement of the predicate, come before it; but that in the structure of

that complement also, the same order is followed: each line being so arranged that the qualifying words are placed before the words suggesting concrete images.

The right succession of the principal and subordinate propositions in a sentence manifestly depends on the same law. Regard for economy of the recipient's attention, which, as we find, determines the best order for the subject, copula, predicate, and their complements, dictates that the subordinate proposition shall precede the principal one, when the sentence includes two. Containing, as the subordinate proposition does, some qualifying or explanatory idea, its priority prevents misconception of the principal one; and therefore saves the mental effort needed to correct such misconception. This will be seen in the annexed example:

> The secrecy once maintained in respect to the parliamentary debates, is still thought needful in diplomacy; and in virtue of this secret diplomacy, England may any day be unawares betrayed by its ministers into a war costing a hundred thousand lives, and hundreds of millions of treasure: yet the English pique themselves on being a self-governed people.

The two subordinate propositions, ending with the semi-colon and colon respectively, almost wholly determine the meaning of the principal proposition with which it concludes; and the effect would be lost were they placed last instead of first.

The general principle of right arrangement in sentences, which we have traced in its application to the leading divisions of them, equally determines the proper order of their minor divisions. In every sentence of any complexity the complement to the subject contains several clauses, and that to the predicate several others; and these may be arranged in greater or less conformity

to the law of easy apprehension. Of course with these, as with the larger members, the succession should be from the less specific to the more specific — from the abstract to the concrete.

Now, however, we must notice a further condition to be fulfilled in the proper construction of a sentence; but still a condition dictated by the same general principle with the other: the condition, namely, that the words and expressions most nearly related in thought shall be brought the closest together. Evidently the single words, the minor clauses, and the leading divisions of every proposition, severally qualify each other. The longer the time that elapses between the mention of any qualifying member and the member qualified, the longer must the mind be exerted in carrying forward the qualifying member ready for use. And the more numerous the qualifications to be simultaneously remembered and rightly applied, the greater will be the mental power expended, and the smaller the effect produced. Hence, other things equal, force will be gained by so arranging the members of a sentence that these suspensions shall at any moment be the fewest in number; and shall also be of the shortest duration. The following is an instance of defective combination:

A modern newspaper-statement, though probably true, would be laughed at if quoted in a book as testimony; but the letter of a court gossip is thought good historical evidence, if written some centuries ago.

A rearrangement of this, in accordance with the principle indicated above, will be found to increase the effect. Thus:

Though probably true, a modern newspaper-statement quoted in a book as testimony, would be laughed at; but the

letter of a court gossip, if written some centuries ago, is thought good historical evidence.

By making this change, some of the suspensions are avoided and others shortened; while there is less liability to produce premature conceptions. The passage quoted below from "Paradise Lost" affords a fine instance of a sentence well arranged; alike in the priority of the subordinate members, in the avoidance of long and numerous suspensions, and in the correspondence between the order of the clauses and the sequence of the phenomena described, which, by the way, is a further prerequisite to easy comprehension, and therefore to effect.

> As when a prowling wolf,
> Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey,
> Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at eve,
> In hurdled cotes amid the field secure,
> Leaps o'er the fence with ease into the fold;
> Or as a thief, bent to unhoard the cash
> Of some rich burgher, whose substantial doors,
> Cross-barred, and bolted fast, fear no assault,
> In at the window climbs, or o'er the tiles;
> So clomb this first grand thief into God's fold;
> So since into his church lewd hirelings climb.

The habitual use of sentences in which all or most of the descriptive and limiting elements precede those described and limited, gives rise to what is called the inverted style: a title which is, however, by no means confined to this structure, but is often used where the order of the words is simply unusual. A more appropriate title would be the *direct style*, as contrasted with the other, or *indirect style:* the peculiarity of the one being, that it conveys each thought into the mind step by step with little liability to error; and of the other,

that it gets the right thought conceived by a series of approximations.

The superiority of the direct over the indirect form of sentence, implied by the several conclusions that have been drawn, must not, however, be affirmed without reservation. Though, up to a certain point, it is well for the qualifying clauses of a period to precede those qualified; yet, as carrying forward each qualifying clause costs some mental effort, it follows that when the number of them and the time they are carried become great, we reach a limit beyond which more is lost than is gained. Other things equal, the arrangement should be such that no concrete image shall be suggested until the materials out of which it is to be made have been presented. And yet, as lately pointed out, other things equal, the fewer the materials to be held at once, and the shorter the distance they have to be borne, the better. Hence in some cases it becomes a question whether most mental effort will be entailed by the many and long suspensions, or by the correction of successive misconceptions.

This question may sometimes be decided by considering the capacity of the persons addressed. A greater grasp of mind is required for the ready comprehension of thoughts expressed in the direct manner, where the sentences are anywise intricate. To recollect a number of preliminaries stated in elucidation of a coming idea, and to apply them all to the formation of it when suggested, demands a good memory and considerable power of concentration. To one possessing these, the direct method will mostly seem the best; while to one deficient in them it will seem the worst. Just as it may cost a strong man less effort to carry a

hundred-weight from place to place at once, than by a stone at a time; so, to an active mind it may be easier to bear along all the qualifications of an idea and at once rightly form it when named, than to first imperfectly conceive such idea and then carry back to it, one by one, the details and limitations afterwards mentioned. While conversely, as for a boy the only possible mode of transferring a hundred-weight is that of taking it in portions; so for a weak mind the only possible mode of forming a compound conception may be that of building it up by carrying separately its several parts.

That the indirect method — the method of conveying the meaning by a series of approximations — is best fitted for the uncultivated, may indeed be inferred from their habitual use of it. The form of expression adopted by the savage, as in — "Water, give me," is the simplest type of the approximate arrangement. In pleonasms, which are comparatively prevalent among the uneducated, the same essential structure is seen; as, for instance, in — "The men, they were there." Again, the old possessive case — "The king, his crown," conforms to the like order of thought. Moreover, the fact that indirect mode is called the natural one, implies that it is the one spontaneously employed by the common people: that is — the one easiest for undisciplined minds.

There are many cases, however, in which neither the direct nor the indirect structure is the best; but where an intermediate structure is preferable to both. When the number of circumstances and qualifications to be included in the sentence is great, the most judicious course is neither to enumerate them all before introducing the idea to which they belong, nor to put this idea

first and let it be remodelled to agree with the particulars afterwards mentioned; but to do a little of each. Take a case. It is desirable to avoid so extremely indirect an arrangement as the following:

We came to our journey's end, at last, with no small difficulty, after much fatigue, through deep roads, and bad weather.

Yet to transform this into an entirely direct sentence would not produce a satisfactory effect; as witness:

At last, with no small difficulty, after much fatigue, through deep roads, and bad weather, we came to our journey's end.

Dr. Whately, from whom we quote the first of these two arrangements, proposes this construction:

At last, after much fatigue, through deep roads and bad weather, we came, with no small difficulty, to our journey's end.

Here it will be observed that by introducing the words "we came" a little earlier in the sentence, the labor of carrying forward so many particulars is diminished, and the subsequent qualification "with no small difficulty" entails an addition to the thought that is very easily made. But a further improvement may be produced by introducing the words "we came" still earlier; especially if at the same time the qualifications be rearranged in conformity with the principle already explained, that the more abstract elements of the thought should come before the more concrete. Observe the better effect obtained by making these two changes:

At last, with no small difficulty, and after much fatigue, we came, through deep roads and bad weather, to our journey's end.

This reads with comparative smoothness; that is, with less hindrance from suspensions and reconstructions of thought — with less mental effort.

Before dismissing this branch of our subject, it should be further remarked, that even when addressing the most vigorous intellects, the direct style is unfit for communicating ideas of a complex or abstract character. So long as the mind has not much to do, it may be well able to grasp all the preparatory clauses of a sentence, and to use them effectively; but if some subtlety in the argument absorb the attention — if every faculty be strained in endeavoring to catch the speaker's or writer's drift, it may happen that the mind, unable to carry on both processes at once, will break down, and allow the elements of the thought to lapse into confusion.

WORDS THAT LAUGH AND CRY[1]

THE NEW YORK *SUN*

"Words that Laugh and Cry" appeared as an editorial in the New York *Sun* on March 16, 1890. It is a compressed body of excellent counsel on writing, and a specimen of the directness and simplicity that characterize the best American editorials.

DID it ever strike you that there was anything queer about the capacity of written words to absorb and convey feelings? Taken separately they are mere symbols with no more feeling to them than so many bricks, but string them along in a row under certain mysterious conditions and you find yourself laughing or crying as your eye runs over them. That words should convey mere ideas is not so remarkable. "The boy is fat," "the cat has nine tails," are statements that seem obviously enough within the power of written language. But it is different with feelings. They are no more visible in the symbols that hold them than electricity is visible on the wire; and yet there they are, always ready to respond when the right test is applied by the right person. That spoken words, charged with human tones and lighted by human eyes, should carry feelings, is not so astonishing. The magnetic sympathy of the orator one understands; he might affect his audience, possibly, if he spoke in a language they did not know. But written words: How can they do it! Suppose, for example, that you possess remarkable facility in grouping language, and that you have strong feelings upon some subject, which finally you determine to com-

[1] Reprinted from *Casual Essays of the Sun*, by permission of the publishers of the New York *Sun*.

mit to paper. Your pen runs along, the words present themselves, or are dragged out, and fall into their places. You are a good deal moved; here you chuckle to yourself, and half a dozen of lines further down a lump comes into your throat, and perhaps you have to wipe your eyes. You finish, and the copy goes to the printer. When it gets into print a reader sees it. His eye runs along the lines and down the page until it comes to the place where you chuckled as your wrote; then he smiles, and six lines below he has to swallow several times and snuffle and wink to restrain an exhibition of weakness. And then some one else comes along who is not so good a word juggler as you are, or who has no feelings, and swaps the words about a little, and twists the sentences; and behold the spell is gone, and you have left a parcel of written language duly charged with facts, but without a single feeling.

No one can juggle with words with any degree of success without getting a vast respect for their independent ability. They will catch the best idea a man ever had as it flashes through his brain, and hold on to it, to surprise him with it long after, and make him wonder that he was ever man enough to have such an idea. And often they will catch an idea on its way from the brain to the pen point, turn, twist, and improve on it as the eye winks, and in an instant there they are, strung hand in hand across the page, and grinning back at the writer: "This is our idea, old man; not yours!"

As for poetry, every word that expects to earn its salt in poetry should have a head and a pair of legs of its own, to go and find its place, carrying another word, if necessary, on its back. The most that should be expected of any competent poet in regular practice is to serve a

general summons and notice of action on the language. If the words won't do the rest for him it indicates that he is out of sympathy with his tools.

But you don't find feelings in written words unless there were feelings in the man who used them. With all their apparent independence they seem to be little vessels that hold in some puzzling fashion exactly what is put into them. You can put tears into them, as though they were so many little buckets; and you can hang smiles along them, like Monday's clothes on the line, or you can starch them with facts and stand them up like a picket fence; but you won't get the tears out unless you first put them in. Art won't put them there. It is like the faculty of getting the quality of interest into pictures. If the quality exists in the artist's mind he is likely to find measn to get it into his pictures, but if it isn't in the man no technical skill will supply it. So, if the feelings are in the writer and he knows his business, they will get into the words; but they must be in him first. It isn't the way the words are strung together that makes Lincoln's Gettysburg speech immortal, but the feelings that were in the man. But how do such little, plain words manage to keep their grip on such feelings? That is the miracle.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION

EDGAR ALLAN POE

1809–1849

SINCE the original publication of "The Philosophy of Composition" in *Graham's Magazine*, April, 1846, it has provoked much discussion. Most critics contend that neither Poe nor anyone else ever wrote a poem or story in the deliberate self-analytical manner in which Poe has told us he set about the composition of "The Raven." This view, however, disregards the most characteristic of Poe's mental habits. True, it might not be possible for most men to analyze their own intentions and then analyze the mental steps required in carrying out the intentions, but for Poe it was not only possible but usual. His stories, his more formal articles, and his poems reveal incessant self-analysis — sometimes to their emotional detriment; and his notes and other fugitive writings constitute a complete commentary on his habit of going about his work with the utmost self-scrutiny and deliberation.

CHARLES DICKENS, in a note now lying before me, alluding to an examination I once made of the mechanism of "Barnaby Rudge," says — "By the way, are you aware that Godwin wrote his 'Caleb Williams' backwards? He first involved his hero in a web of difficulties, forming the second volume, and then, for the first, cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done."

I cannot think this the *precise* mode of procedure on the part of Godwin — and indeed what he himself acknowledges, is not altogether in accordance with Mr. Dickens' idea — but the author of "Caleb Williams" was too good an artist not to perceive the advantage derivable from at least a somewhat similar process.

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis — or one is suggested by an incident of the day — or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative — designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or autorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view — for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest — I say to myself, in the first place, "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone — whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone — afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would —

that is to say who could — detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say — but, perhaps, the autorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers — poets in especial — prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition — and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought — at the true purposes seized only at the last moment — at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view — at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable — at the cautious selections and rejections — at the painful erasures and interpolations — in a word, at the wheels and pinions — the tackle for scene-shifting — the step-ladders and demon-traps — the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrio*.

I am aware, on the other hand, that the case is by no means common, in which an author is at all in condition to retrace the steps by which his conclusions have been attained. In general, suggestions, having arisen pell-mell, are pursued and forgotten in a similar manner.

For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor, at any time the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions; and, since the interest of an analysis, or reconstruction, such as I have considered a *desideratum*, is quite independent of any real or fancied

interest in the thing analyzed, it will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the *modus operandi* by which some one of my own works was put together. I select "The Raven," as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.

Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem, *per se*, the circumstance — or say the necessity — which, in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing *a* poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.

We commence, then, with this intention.

The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression — for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed. But since, *ceteris paribus*, no poet can afford to dispense with *any thing* that may advance his design, it but remains to be seen whether there is, in extent, any advantage to counterbalance the loss of unity which attends it. Here I say no, at once. What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones — that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief. For this reason, at least one half of the "Paradise Lost" is essentially prose — a succession of poetical excitements inter-

spersed, *inevitably*, with corresponding depressions — the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity, of effect.

It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art — the limit of a single sitting — and that, although in certain classes of prose composition, such as "Robinson Crusoe," (demanding no unity), this limit may be advantageously overpassed, it can never properly be overpassed in a poem. Within this limit, the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit — in other words, to the excitement or elevation — again in other words, to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect: this, with one proviso — that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all.

Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste, I reached at once what I conceived the proper *length* for my intended poem — a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight.

My next thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed: and here I may as well observe that, throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work *universally* appreciable. I should be carried too far out of my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly insisted, and which, with the poetical, stands not in the slightest need of demonstra-

tion — the point, I mean, that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem. A few words, however, in elucidation of my real meaning, which some of my friends have evinced a disposition to misrepresent. That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect — they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul* — *not* of intellect, or of heart — upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating "the beautiful." Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes — that objects should be attained through means best adapted for their attainment — no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation alluded to is *most readily* attained in the poem. Now the object, Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object Passion, or the excitement of the heart, are, although attainable, to a certain extent, in poetry, far more readily attainable in prose. Truth, in fact, demands a precision, and Passion a *homeliness* (the truly passionate will comprehend me) which are absolutely antagonistic to that Beauty which, I maintain, is the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul. It by no means follows from any thing here said, that passion, or even truth, may not be introduced, and even profitably introduced, into a poem — for they may serve in elucidation, or aid the general effect, as do discords in music, by contrast — but the true artist will always contrive, first, to tone them into proper subservience to

the predominant aim, and, secondly, to enveil them, as far as possible, in that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the essence of the poem.

Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the *tone* of its highest manifestation — and all experience has shown that this tone is one of *sadness*. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.

The length, the province, and the tone, being thus determined, I betook myself to ordinary induction, with the view of obtaining some artistic piquancy which might serve me as a key-note in the construction of the poem — some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn. In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects — or more properly *points*, in the theatrical sense — I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the *refrain*. The universality of its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value, and spared me the necessity of submitting it to analysis. I considered it, however, with regard to its susceptibility of improvement, and soon saw it to be in a primitive condition. As commonly used, the *refrain*, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends for its impression upon the force of monotone — both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity — of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation *of the applica-*

tion of the *refrain* — the *refrain* itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.

These points being settled, I next bethought me of the *nature* of my *refrain*. Since its application was to be repeatedly varied, it was clear that the *refrain* itself must be brief, for there would have been an insurmountable difficulty in frequent variations of application in any sentence of length. In proportion to the brevity of the sentence, would, of course, be the facility of the variation. This led me at once to a single word as the best *refrain*.

The question now arose as to the *character* of the word. Having made up my mind to a *refrain*, the division of the poem into stanzas was, of course, a corollary: the *refrain* forming the close of each stanza. That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant.

The sound of the *refrain* being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem. In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word "Nevermore." In fact, it was the very first which presented itself.

The next *desideratum* was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word "nevermore." In observing the difficulty which I at once found in inventing a sufficiently plausible reason for its continuous repetition, I did not fail to perceive that this difficulty arose solely from the pre-assumption that the word was to be so con-

tinuously or monotonously spoken by *a human* being — I did not fail to perceive, in short, that the difficulty lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately arose the idea of a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech; and, very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended *tone*.

I had now gone so far as the conception of a Raven — the bird of ill omen — monotonously repeating the one word, "Nevermore," at the conclusion of each stanza, in a poem of melancholy tone, and in length about one hundred lines. Now, never losing sight of the object *supremeness*, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself — "Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?" Death — was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?" From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious — "When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world — and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover."

I had now to combine the two ideas, of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word "Nevermore." I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying, at every turn, the *application* of the word repeated; but the only intelligible mode of such combination is that of imagin-

ing the Raven employing the word in answer to the queries of the lover. And here it was that I saw at once the opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending — that is to say, the effect of the *variation of application.* I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover — the first query to which the Raven should reply "Nevermore" — that I could make this first query a commonplace one — the second less so — the third still less, and so on — until at length the lover, startled from his original *nonchalance* by the melancholy character of the word itself — by its frequent repetition — and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it — is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character — queries whose solution he has passionately at heart — propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture — propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the *expected* "Nevermore" the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow. Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me — or, more strictly, thus forced upon me in the progress of the construction — I first established in mind the climax, or concluding query — that query to which "Nevermore" should be in the last place an answer — that in reply to which this word "Nevermore" should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.

Here then the poem may be said to have its beginning — at the end, where all works of art should begin — for

it was here, at this point of my preconsiderations, that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

"Prophet," said I, "thing of evil! prophet still if bird or devil!
By that heaven that bends above us — by that God we both adore,
Tell this soul with sorrow laden, if within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore —
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."
Quoth the raven "Nevermore."

I composed this stanza, at this point, first that, by establishing the climax, I might the better vary and graduate, as regards seriousness and importance, the preceding queries of the lover — and, secondly, that I might definitely settle the rhythm, the metre, and the length and general arrangement of the stanza — as well as graduate the stanzas which were to precede, so that none of them might surpass this in rhythmical effect. Had I been able, in the subsequent composition, to construct more vigorous stanzas, I should, without scruple, have purposely enfeebled them, so as not to interfere with the climacteric effect.

And here I may as well say a few words of the versification. My first object (as usual) was originality. The extent to which this has been neglected, in versification, is one of the most unaccountable things in the world. Admitting that there is little possibility of variety in mere *rhythm*, it is still clear that the possible varieties of metre and stanza are absolutely infinite — and yet, *for centuries, no man, in verse, has ever done, or ever seemed to think of doing, an original thing.* The fact is, that orig-

inality (unless in minds of very unusual force) is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought, and although a positive merit of the highest class, demands in its attainment less of invention than negation.

Of course, I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or metre of the "Raven." The former is trochaic — the latter is octameter acatalectic, alternating with heptameter catalectic repeated in the *refrain* of the fifth verse, and terminating with tetrameter catalectic. Less pedantically — the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long syllable followed by a short: the first line of the stanza consists of eight of these feet — the second of seven and a half (in effect two-thirds) — the third of eight — the fourth of seven and a half — the fifth the same — the sixth three and a half. Now, each of these lines, taken individually, has been employed before, and what originality the "Raven" has, is in their *combination into stanza;* nothing even remotely approaching this combination has ever been attempted. The effect of this originality of combination is aided by other unusual, and some altogether novel effects, arising from an extension of the application of the principles of rhyme and alliteration.

The next point to be considered was the mode of bringing together the lover and the Raven — and the first branch of this consideration was the *locale.* For this the most natural suggestion might seem to be a forest, or the fields — but it has always appeared to me that a close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: — it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable

moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place.

I determined, then, to place the lover in his chamber — in a chamber rendered sacred to him by memories of her who had frequented it. The room is represented as richly furnished — this in mere pursuance of the ideas I have already explained on the subject of Beauty, as the sole true poetical thesis.

The *locale* being thus determined, I had now to introduce the bird — and the thought of introducing him through the window, was inevitable. The idea of making the lover suppose, in the first instance, that the flapping of the wings of the bird against the shutter is a "tapping" at the door, originated in a wish to increase, by prolonging, the reader's curiosity, and in a desire to admit the incidental effect arising from the lover's throwing open the door, finding all dark, and thence adopting the half-fancy that it was the spirit of his mistress that knocked.

I made the night tempestuous, first, to account for the Raven's seeking admission, and secondly, for the effect of contrast with the (physical) serenity within the chamber.

I made the bird alight on the bust of Pallas, also for the effect of contrast between the marble and the plumage — it being understood that the bust was absolutely *suggested* by the bird — the bust of *Pallas* being chosen, first, as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and, secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself.

About the middle of the poem, also, I have availed myself of the force of contrast, with a view of deepening

the ultimate impression. For example, an air of the fantastic — approaching as nearly to the ludicrous as was admissible — is given to the Raven's entrance. He comes in "with many a flirt and flutter."

Not the *least obeisance made he* — not a moment stopped or stayed he,
But with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door.

In the two stanzas which follow, the design is more obviously carried out: —

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling
By the *grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore*,
"Though thy *crest be shorn and shaven* thou," I said, "art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the nightly shore —
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore?"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

Much I marvelled *this ungainly fowl* to hear discourse so plainly
Though its answer little meaning — little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door —
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as "Nevermore."

The effect of the *dénouement* being thus provided for, I immediately drop the fantastic for a tone of the most profound seriousness: — this tone commencing in the stanza directly following the one last quoted, with the line,

But the Raven, sitting lonely on that placid bust, spoke only,
etc.

From this epoch the lover no longer jests — no longer sees any thing even of the fantastic in the Raven's demeanor. He speaks of him as a "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore," and feels the "fiery eyes" burning into his "bosom's core." This revolution of thought, or fancy, on the lover's part, is intended to induce a similar one on the part of the reader — to bring the mind into a proper frame for the *dênouement* — which is now brought about as rapidly and as *directly* as possible.

With the *dênouement* proper — with the Raven's reply, "Nevermore," to the lover's final demand if he shall meet his mistress in another world — the poem, in its obvious phase, that of a simple narrative, may be said to have its completion. So far, every thing is within the limits of the accountable — of the real. A raven, having learned by rote the single word "Nevermore," and having escaped from the custody of its owner, is driven at midnight, through the violence of a storm, to seek admission at a window from which a light still gleams — the chamber-window of a student, occupied half in poring over a volume, half in dreaming of a beloved mistress deceased. The casement being thrown open at the fluttering of the bird's wings, the bird itself perches on the most convenient seat out of the immediate reach of the student, who, amused by the incident and the oddity of the visitor's demeanor, demands of it, in jest and without looking for a reply, its name. The raven addressed, answers with its customary word, "Nevermore" — a word which finds immediate ech oin the melancholy heart of the student, who, giving utterance aloud to certain thoughts suggested by the occasion, is again startled by the fowl's

repetition of "Nevermore." The student now guesses the state of the case, but is impelled, as I have before explained, by the human thirst for self-torture, and in part by superstition, to propound such queries to the bird as will bring him, the lover, the most of the luxury of sorrow, through the anticipated answer "Nevermore." With the indulgence, to the extreme, of this self-torture, the narration, in what I have termed its first or obvious phase, has a natural termination, and so far there has been no overstepping of the limits of the real.

But in subjects so handled, however skilfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistical eye. Two things are invariably required — first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness — some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness* (to borrow from colloquy a forcible term) which we are too fond of confounding with *the ideal*. It is the *excess* of the suggested meaning — it is the rendering this the upper instead of the under current of the theme — which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so called poetry of the so called transcendentalists.

Holding these opinions, I added the two concluding stanzas of the poem — their suggestiveness being thus made to pervade all the narrative which has preceded them. The under-current of meaning is rendered first apparent in the lines —

"Take thy beak from out *my heart*, and take thy form from off my door!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore!"

It will be observed that the words, "from out my heart," involve the first metaphorical expression in the poem. They, with the answer, "Nevermore," dispose the mind to seek a moral in all that has been previously narrated. The reader begins now to regard the Raven as emblematical — but it is not until the very last line of the very last stanza, that the intention of making him emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is permitted distinctly to be seen:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting,
On the pallid bust of Pallas, just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul *from out that shadow* that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted — nevermore.

MARGINALIA

SOME Frenchman, possibly Montaigne, says: "People talk about thinking, but for my part I never think, except when I sit down to write." It is this never thinking, unless when we sit down to write, which is the cause of so much indifferent composition. But perhaps there is something more involved in the Frenchman's observation than meets the eye. It is certain that the mere act of inditing tends, in a great degree, to the localization of thought. Whenever, on account of its vagueness, I am dissatisfied with a conception of the brain, I resort forthwith to the pen, for the purpose of obtaining, through its aid, the necessary form, consequence, and precision.

How very commonly we hear it remarked that such and such thoughts are beyond the compass of words! I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty in expression is experienced, there is, in the intellect which experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method. For my own part I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it; as I have before observed, the thought is logicalized by the effort at (written) expression. There is, however, a class of fancies of exquisite delicacy, which are not thoughts, and to which, as yet, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word "fancies" at random, and merely because I must use some word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather physical than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquillity, when the bodily and mental health are in perfection, and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams. I am aware of these "fancies" only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable point of time, yet it is crowded with these "shadows of shadows"; and for absolute thought there is demanded time's endurance. These "fancies" have in them a pleasurable ecstasy, as far beyond the most pleasurable of the world of wakefulness or of dreams as the heaven of the Northman theology is beyond its hell. I regard the visions, even as they arise,

with an awe which, in some measure, moderates or tranquillizes the ecstasy; I so regard them through a conviction (which seems a portion of the ecstasy itself) that this ecstasy, in itself, is of a character supernal to human nature — is a glimpse of the spirit's outer world; and I arrive at this conclusion, if this term is at all applicable to instantaneous intuition, by a perception that the delight experienced has, as its element, but the absoluteness of novelty. I say the "absoluteness," for in these fancies — let me now term them psychal impressions — there is really nothing even approximate in character to impressions ordinarily received. It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality.

Now, so entire is my faith in the power of words, that, at times, I have believed it possible to embody even the evanescence of fancies such as I have attempted to describe. In experiments with this end in view, I have proceeded so far as, first, to control (when the bodily and mental health are good) the existence of the condition; that is to say, I can now (unless when ill) be sure that the condition will supervene, if I so wish it, at the point of time already described; of its supervention, until lately, I could never be certain, even under the most favorable circumstances. I mean to say, merely, that now I can be sure, when all circumstances are favorable, of the supervention of the condition, and feel even the capacity of inducing or compelling it; the favorable circumstances, however, are not the less rare, else had I compelled, already, the heaven into the earth.

I have proceeded so far, secondly, as to prevent the lapse from the point of which I speak, the point of blending between wakefulness and sleep — as to pre-

vent at will, I say, the lapse from this border-ground into the dominion of sleep. Not that I can continue the condition, not that I can render the point more than a point, but I can startle myself from the point into wakefulness, and thus transfer the point itself into the realm of memory; convey its impressions, or more properly their recollections, to a situation where (although still for a very brief period) I can survey them with the eye of analysis. For these reasons, that is to say, because I have been enabled to accomplish thus much, I do not altogether despair of embodying in words at least enough of the fancies in question to convey to certain classes of intellect a shadowy conception of their character. In saying this I am not to be understood as supposing that the fancies, or psychal impressions, to which I allude, are confined to my individual self — are not, in a word, common to all mankind, for on this point it is quite impossible that I should form an opinion; but nothing can be more certain than that even a partial record of the impressions would startle the universal intellect of mankind by the supremeness of the novelty of the material employed, and of its consequent suggestions. In a word, should I ever write a paper on this topic, the world will be compelled to acknowledge that, at last, I have done an original thing.

That punctuation is important all agree; but how few comprehend the extent of its importance! The writer who neglects punctuation, or mispunctuates, is liable to be misunderstood; this, according to the popular idea, is the sum of evils arising from heedlessness or ignorance. It does not seem to be known that, even where the sense

is perfectly clear, a sentence may be deprived of half its force, its spirit, its point, by improper punctuations. For the want of merely a comma, it often occurs that an axiom appears a paradox, or that a sarcasm is converted into a sermonoid. There is no treatise on the topic, and there is no topic on which a treatise is more needed. There seems to exist a vulgar notion that the subject is one of pure conventionality, and cannot be brought within the limits of intelligible and consistent rule. And yet, if fairly looked in the face, the whole matter is so plain that its rationale may be read as we run. If not anticipated, I shall, hereafter, make an attempt at a magazine paper on "The Philosophy of Point." In the meantime let me say a word or two of the dash. Every writer for the press, who has any sense of the accurate, must have been frequently mortified and vexed at the distortion of his sentences by the printer's now general substitution of a semicolon or comma for the dash of the manuscript. The total or nearly total disuse of the latter point has been brought about by the revulsion consequent upon its excessive employment about twenty years ago. The Byronic poets were all dash. John Neal, in his earlier novels, exaggerated its use into the grossest abuse, although his very error arose from the philosophical and self-dependent spirit which has always distinguished him, and which will even yet lead him, if I am not greatly mistaken in the man, to do something for the literature of the country which the country "will not willingly," and cannot possibly, "let die." Without entering now into the why, let me observe that the printer may always ascertain when the dash of the manuscript is properly and when improperly employed by bearing in mind that this point

represents a second thought — an emendation. In using it just above I have exemplified its use. The words, "an emendation," are, speaking with reference to grammatical construction, put in apposition with the words "a second thought." Having written these latter words, I reflected whether it would not be possible to render their meaning more distinct by certain other words. Now, instead of erasing the phrase, "a second thought," which is of some use, which partially conveys the idea intended — which advances me a step toward my full purpose — I suffer it to remain, and merely put a dash between it and the phrase, "an emendation." The dash gives the reader a choice between two, or among three or more expressions, one of which may help out the idea. It stands, in general, for these words, "or, to make my meaning more distinct." This force it has, and this force no other point can have; since all other points have well-understood uses quite different from this. Therefore the dash cannot be dispensed with. It has its phases, its variation of the force described; but the one principle — that of a second thought or emendation — will be found at the bottom of all.

Men of genius are far more abundant than is supposed. In fact, to appreciate thoroughly the work of what we call genius is to possess all the genius by which the work was produced. But the person appreciating may be utterly incompetent to reproduce the work, or anything similar, and this solely through lack of what may be termed the constructive ability, a matter quite independent of what we agree to understand in the term "genius" itself. This ability is based, to be sure,

in great part, upon the faculty of analysis, enabling the artist to get full view of the machinery of his proposed effect, and thus work it and regulate it at will; but a great deal depends also upon properties strictly moral; for example, upon patience, upon concentrativeness, or the power of holding the attention steadily to the one purpose, upon self-dependence and contempt for all opinion which is opinion and no more — in especial, upon energy or industry. So vitally important is this last, that it may well be doubted if anything to which we have been accustomed to give the title of a "work of genius" was ever accomplished without it; and it is chiefly because this quality and genius are nearly incompatible that "works of genius" are few, while mere men of genius are, as I say, abundant. The Romans, who excelled us in acuteness of observation while falling below us in induction from facts observed, seem to have been so fully aware of the inseparable connection between industry and a "work of genius" as to have adopted the error that industry, in great measure, was genius itself. The highest compliment is intended by a Roman, when, of an epic, or anything similar, he says that it is written *industria mirabili* or *incredibili industria.*

The pure imagination chooses, from either beauty or deformity, only the most combinable things hitherto uncombined; the compound, as a general rule, partaking, in character of beauty or sublimity, in the ratio of the respective beauty or sublimity of the things combined, which are themselves still to be considered as atomic, that is to say, as previous combinations. But, as often analogously happens in physical chemistry, so

not unfrequently does it occur in this chemistry of the intellect, that the admixture of two elements results in a something that has nothing of the qualities of one of them, or even nothing of the qualities of either. . . . Thus the range of imagination is unlimited. Its materials extend throughout the universe. Even out of deformities it fabricates that beauty which is at once its sole object and its inevitable test. But, in general, the richness or force of the matters combined, the facility of discovering combinable novelties worth combining, and, especially, the absolute "chemical combination" of the completed mass, are the particulars to be regarded in our estimate of imagination. It is this thorough harmony of an imaginative work which so often causes it to be undervalued by the thoughtless, through the character of obviousness which is superinduced. We are apt to find ourselves asking why it is that these combinations have never been imagined before.

JUDGMENTS OF AUTHORS[1]

GEORGE ELIOT

1819–1880

"JUDGMENTS of Authors" is one of the short papers published in *Leaves from a Notebook*, 1884. George Eliot's fragmentary papers throw much light on an author's ways of estimating literary value.

IN endeavoring to estimate a remarkable writer who aimed at more than temporary influence, we have first to consider what was his individual contribution to the spiritual wealth of mankind. Had he a new conception? Did he animate long-known but neglected truths with new vigour, and cast fresh light on their relation to other admitted truths? Did he impregnate any ideas with a fresh store of emotion, and in this way enlarge the area of moral sentiment? Did he, by a wise emphasis here, and a wise disregard there, give a more useful or beautiful proportion to aims or motives? And even where his thinking was most mixed with the sort of mistake which is obvious to the majority, as well as that which can only be discerned by the instructed, or made manifest by the progress of things, has it that salt of a noble enthusiasm which should rebuke our critical discrimination if its correctness is inspired with a less admirable habit of feeling?

This is not the common or easy course to take in estimating a modern writer. It requires considerable knowledge of what he has himself done, as well as of what others have done before him, or what they were

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doing contemporaneously; it requires deliberate reflection as to the degree in which our own prejudices may hinder us from appreciating the intellectual or moral bearing of what on a first view offends us. An easier course is to notice some salient mistakes, and to take them as decisive of the writer's incompetence; or to find out that something apparently much the same as what he has said in some connection not clearly ascertained had been said by somebody else, though without great effect, until this new effect of discrediting the other's originality had shown itself as an adequate final cause; or to pronounce from the point of view of individual taste that this writer for whom regard is claimed is repulsive, wearisome, not to be borne except by those dull persons who are of a different opinion.

Elder writers who have passed into classics were doubtless treated in this easy way when they were still under the misfortune of being recent — nay, are still dismissed with the same rapidity of judgment by daring ignorance. But people who think that they have a reputation to lose in the matter of knowledge have looked into cyclopaedias and histories of philosophy or literature, and possessed themselves of the duly balanced epithets concerning the immortals. They are not left to their own unguided rashness, or their own unguided pusillanimity. And it is this sheeplike flock who have no direct impressions, no spontaneous delight, no genuine objection or self-confessed neutrality in relation to the writers become classic — it is these who are incapable of passing a genuine judgment on the living. Necessarily. The susceptibility they have kept active is a susceptibility to their own reputation for passing the right judgment, not the susceptibility to qualities in the

object of judgment. Who learns to discriminate shades of colour by considering what is expected of him? The habit of expressing borrowed judgments stupefies the sensibilities, which are the only foundation of genuine judgments, just as the constant reading and retailing of results from other men's observations through the microscope, without ever looking through the lens one's self, is an instruction in some truths and some prejudices, but is no instruction in observant susceptibility; on the contrary, it breeds a habit of inward seeing according to verbal statement, which dulls the power of outward seeing according to visual evidence.

On this subject, as on so many others, it is difficult to strike the balance between the educational needs of passivity or receptivity, and independent selection. We should learn nothing without the tendency to implicit acceptance; but there must clearly be a limit to such mental submission, else we should come to a standstill. The human mind would be no better than a dried specimen representing an unchangeable type. When the assimilation of new matter ceases, decay must begin. In a reasoned self-restraining deference there is as much energy as in rebellion; but among the less capable, one must admit that the superior energy is on the side of the rebels. And certainly a man who dares to say that he finds an eminent classic feeble here, extravagant there, and in general overrated, may chance to give an opinion which has some genuine discrimination in it concerning a new work or a living thinker, — an opinion such as can hardly ever be got from the reputed judge who is a correct echo of the most approved phrases concerning those who have been already canonized.

SIMPLICITY IN ART[1]

FRANK NORRIS

1870–1902

This brief paper is reprinted from the volume entitled *The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (Doubleday, Page and Company, 1903). Frank Norris is best known as the author of *The Octopus* and *The Pit*, two parts of the unfinished trilogy, "The Epic of the Wheat"; but his numerous informal papers, brought together in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, are deserving of a place in every student's working library.

ONCE upon a time I had occasion to buy so uninteresting a thing as a silver soup-ladle. The salesman at the silversmith's was obliging and for my inspection brought forth quite an array of ladles. But my purse was flaccid, anemic, and I must pick and choose with all the discrimination in the world. I wanted to make a brave showing with my gift — to get a great deal for my money. I went through a world of soup-ladles — ladles with gilded bowls, with embossed handles, with chased arabesques, but there were none to my taste. "Or perhaps," says the salesman, "you would care to look at something like this," and he brought out a ladle that was as plain and as unadorned as the unclouded sky — and about as beautiful. Of all the others this was the most to my liking. But the price! ah, that anemic purse; and I must put it from me! It was nearly double the cost of any of the rest. And when I asked why, the salesman said:

"You see, in this highly ornamental ware the flaws of the material don't show, and you can cover up a blow-

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hole or the like by wreaths and beading. But this plain ware has got to be the very best. Every defect is apparent."

And there, if you please, is a conclusive comment upon the whole business — a final basis of comparison of all things whether commercial or artistic; the bare dignity of the unadorned that may stand before the world all unashamed, panoplied rather than clothed in the consciousness of perfection. We of this latter day, we painters and poets and writers — artists — must labour with all the wits of us, all the strength of us, and with all that we have of ingenuity and perseverance to attain simplicity. But it has not always been so. At the very earliest, men — forgotten, ordinary men — were born with an easy, unblurred vision that to-day we would hail as marvelous genius. Suppose, for instance, the New Testament was all unwritten and one of us were called upon to tell the world that Christ was born, to tell of how we had seen Him, that this was the Messiah. How the adjectives would marshal upon the page, how the exclamatory phrases would cry out, how we would elaborate and elaborate, and how our rhetoric would flare and blazen till — so we should imagine — the ear would ring and the very eye would be dazzled; and even then we would believe that our words were all so few and feeble. It is beyond words, we would vociferate. So it would be. That is very true — words of ours. Can you not see how we should dramatize it? We would make a point of the transcendent stillness of the hour, of the deep blue of the Judean midnight, of the liplapping of Galilee, the murmur of Jordan, the peacefulness of sleeping Jerusalem. Then the stars, the descent of the angel, the shepherds — all the acces-

sories. And our narrative would be as commensurate with the subject as the flippant smartness of a "bright" reporter in the Sistine chapel. We would be striving to cover up our innate incompetence, our impotence to do justice to the mighty theme by elaborateness of design and arabesque intricacy of rhetoric.

But on the other hand — listen:

"The days were accomplished that she should be delivered, and she brought forth her first born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Simplicity could go no further. Absolutely not one word unessential, not a single adjective that is not merely descriptive. The whole matter stated with the terseness of a military report, and yet — there is the epic, the world epic, beautiful, majestic, incomparably dignified, and no ready writer, no Milton nor Shakspere, with all the wealth of their vocabularies, with all the resources of their genius, with all their power of simile or metaphor, their pomp of eloquence or their royal pageantry of hexameters, could produce the effect contained in these two simple declarative sentences.

The mistake that we little people are so prone to make is this: that the more intense the emotional quality of the scene described, the more "vivid," the more exalted, the more richly coloured we suppose should be the language.

When the crisis of the tale is reached there is where we like the author to spread himself, to show the effectiveness of his treatment. But if we would only pause to take a moment's thought we must surely see that the simplest, even the barest statement of fact is not only all-sufficient but all-appropriate.

Elaborate phrase, rhetoric, the intimacy of metaphor and allegory and simile is forgivable for the unimportant episodes where the interest of the narrative is languid; where we are willing to watch the author's ingenuity in the matter of scrolls and fretwork and mosaics-rococo work. But when the catastrophe comes, when the narrative swings clear upon its pivot and we are lifted with it from out the world of our surroundings, we want to forget the author. We want no adjectives to blur our substantives. The substantives may now speak for themselves. We want no metaphor, no simile to make clear the matter. If at this moment of drama and intensity the matter is not of itself preëminently clear, no verbiage, however ingenious, will clarify it. Heighten the effect. Does exclamation and heroics on the part of the bystanders ever make the curbstone drama more poignant? Who would care to see Niagara through coloured fire and calcium lights?

The simple treatment, whether of a piece of silversmith work or of a momentous religious epic, is always the most difficult of all. It demands more of the artist. The unskilful story-teller as often as not tells the story to himself as well as to his hearers as he goes along. Not sure of exactly how he is to reach the end, not sure even of the end itself, he must feel his way from incident to incident, from page to page, fumbling, using many words, repeating himself. To hide the confusion there is one resource — elaboration, exaggerated outline, violent colour, till at last the unstable outline disappears under the accumulation, and the reader is to be so dazzled with the wit of the dialogue, the smartness of the repartee, the felicity of the diction, that he will not see the gaps and lapses in the structure itself — just as

the "nobby" drummer wears a wide and showy scarf to conceal a soiled shirt-bosom.

But in the master-works of narrative there is none of this shamming, no shoddyism, no humbug. There is little more than bare outline, but in the care with which it is drawn, how much thought, what infinite pains go to the making of each stroke, so that when it is made it falls just at the right place and exactly in its right sequence. This attained, what need is there for more ? Comment is superfluous. If the author make the scene appear terrible to the reader, he need not say in himself or in the mouth of some protagonist, "It is terrible!" If the picture is pathetic so that he who reads must weep, how superfluous, how intrusive should the author exclaim, "It was pitiful to the point of tears." If beautiful, we do not want him to tell us so. We want him to make it beautiful and our own appreciation will supply the adjectives.

Beauty, the ultimate philosophical beauty, is not a thing of elaboration, but on the contrary of an almost barren nudity: a jewel may be an exquisite gem, a woman may have a beautiful arm, but the bracelet does not make the arm more beautiful, nor the arm the bracelet. One must admire them separately, and the moment that the jewel ceases to have a value or a reason upon the arm it is better in the case, where it may enjoy an undivided attention.

But after so many hundreds of years of art and artists, of civilization and progress, we have got so far away from the sane old homely uncomplex way of looking out at the world that the simple things no longer charm, and the simple declarative sentence, straightforward, plain, seems flat to our intellectual palate — flat and tasteless and crude.

What we would now call simple our forbears would look upon as a farrago of gimcrackery, and all our art — the art of the better-minded of us — is only a striving to get back to the unblurred, direct simplicity of those writers who could see that the Wonderful, the Counselor, the mighty God, the Prince of Peace, could be laid in a manger and yet be the Saviour of the world.

It is this same spirit, this disdaining of simplicity that has so warped and inflated The First Story, making of it a pomp, an affair of gold-embroidered vestments and costly choirs, of marbles, of jeweled windows and of incense, unable to find the thrill as formerly in the plain and humble stable, and the brown-haired, grave-eyed peasant girl, with her little baby; unable to see the beauty in the crumbling mud walls, the low-ceiled interior, where the only incense was the sweet smell of the cow's breath, the only vestments the swaddling clothes, rough, coarse-fibered, from the hand-looms of Nazareth, the only pomp the scanty gifts of three old men, and the only chanting the crooning of a young mother holding her first-born babe upon her breast.

LANGUAGE AND THE MAN[1]

JOHN RUSKIN

1819–1900

THIS passage is from Ruskin's lecture on "The Relation of Art to Morals." It was published as one of the chapters of his *Lectures on Art,* 1870.

AND this it was that I called upon you to hear, saying, "listen to me at least now," in the first lecture, namely, that no art-teaching could be of use to you, but would rather be harmful, unless it was grafted on something deeper than all art. For indeed not only with this, of which it is my function to show you the laws, but much more with the art of all men, which you came here chiefly to learn, that of language, the chief vices of education have arisen from the one great fallacy of supposing that noble language is a communicable trick of grammar and accent, instead of simply the careful expression of right thought. All the virtues of language are, in their roots, moral; it becomes accurate if the speaker desires to be true; clear if he speaks with sympathy and a desire to be intelligible; powerful, if he has earnestness; pleasant, if he has sense of rhythm and order. There are no other virtues of language producible by art than these: but let me mark more deeply for an instant the significance of one of them. Language, I said, is only clear when it is sympathetic. You can, in truth, understand a man's word only by understanding his temper. Your own word is also as of an unknown

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tongue to him unless he understands yours. And this it is that makes the art of language, if any one is to be chosen separately from the rest, that which is fittest for the instrument of a gentleman's education. To teach the meaning of a word thoroughly, is to teach the nature of the spirit that coined it; the secret of language is the secret of sympathy, and its full charm is possible only to the gentle. And thus the principles of beautiful speech have all been fixed by sincere and kindly speech. On the laws which have been determined by sincerity, false speech, apparently beautiful, may afterwards be constructed; but all such utterance, whether in oration or poetry, is not only without permanent power, but it is destructive of the principles it has usurped. So long as no words are uttered but in faithfulness, so long the art of language goes on exalting itself; but the moment it is shaped and chiselled on external principles, it falls into frivolity, and perishes. And this truth would have been long ago manifest, had it not been that in periods of advanced academical science there is always a tendency to deny the sincerity of the first masters of language. Once learn to write gracefully in the manner of an ancient author, and we are apt to think that he also wrote in the manner of some one else. But no noble nor right style was ever yet founded but out of a sincere heart.

No man is worth reading to form your style, who does not mean what he says; nor was any great style ever invented but by some man who meant what he said. Find out the beginning of a great manner of writing, and you have also found the declarer of some true facts or sincere passions: and your whole method of reading will thus be quickened, for, being sure that your author really meant

what he said, you will be much more careful to ascertain what it is that he means.

And of yet greater importance is it deeply to know that every beauty possessed by the language of a nation is significant of the innermost laws of its being. Keep the temper of the people stern and manly; make their associations grave, courteous, and for worthy objects; occupy them in just deeds; and their tongue must needs be a grand one. Nor is it possible, therefore — observe the necessary reflected action — that any tongue should be a noble one, of which the words are not so many trumpet-calls to action. All great languages invariably utter great things, and command them; they cannot be mimicked but by obedience; the breath of them is inspiration because it is not only vocal, but vital; and you can only learn to speak as these men spoke, by becoming what these men were.

THE MORALITY OF THE PROFESSION OF LETTERS[1]

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

1850–1894

This literary creed of Stevenson's was first published in the *Fortnightly Review*, April, 1881.

THE profession of letters has been lately debated in the public prints; and it has been debated, to put the matter mildly, from a point of view that was calculated to surprise high-minded men, and bring a general contempt on books and reading. Some time ago, in particular, a lively, pleasant, popular writer[2] devoted an essay, lively and pleasant like himself, to a very encouraging view of the profession. We may be glad that his experience is so cheering, and we may hope that all others, who deserve it, shall be as handsomely rewarded; but I do not think we need be at all glad to have this question, so important to the public and ourselves, debated solely on the ground of money. The salary in any business under heaven is not the only, nor indeed the first, question. That you should continue to exist is a matter for your own consideration; but that your business should be first honest, and second useful, are points in which honour and morality are concerned. If the writer to whom I refer succeeds in persuading a number of young persons to adopt this way of life with an eye set singly on the livelihood, we must expect them

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[2] Mr. James Payn.

in their works to follow profit only, and we must expect in consequence, if he will pardon me the epithets, a slovenly, base, untrue, and empty literature. Of that writer himself I am not speaking: he is diligent, clean, and pleasing; we all owe him periods of entertainment, and he has achieved an amiable popularity which he has adequately deserved. But the truth is, he does not, or did not when he first embraced it, regard his profession from this purely mercenary side. He went into it, I shall venture to say, if not with any noble design, at least in the ardour of a first love; and he enjoyed its practice long before he paused to calculate the wage. The other day an author was complimented on a piece of work, good in itself and exceptionally good for him, and replied, in terms unworthy of a commercial traveller, that as the book was not briskly selling he did not give a copper farthing for its merit. It must not be supposed that the person to whom this answer was addressed received it as a profession of faith; he knew, on the other hand, that it was only a whiff of irritation; just as we know, when a respectable writer talks of literature as a way of life, like shoemaking, but not so useful, that he is only debating one aspect of a question, and is still clearly conscious of a dozen others more important in themselves and more central to the matter in hand. But while those who treat literature in this penny-wise and virtue-foolish spirit are themselves truly in possession of a better light, it does not follow that the treatment is decent or improving, whether for themselves or others. To treat all subjects in the highest, the most honourable, and the pluckiest spirit, consistent with the fact, is the first duty of a writer. If he be well paid, as I am glad to hear he is, this duty becomes the

more urgent, the neglect of it the more disgraceful. And perhaps there is no subject on which a man should speak so gravely as that industry, whatever it may be, which is the occupation or delight of his life; which is his tool to earn or serve with; and which, if it be unworthy, stamps himself as a mere incubus of dumb and greedy bowels on the shoulders of labouring humanity. On that subject alone even to force the note might lean to virtue's side. It is to be hoped that a numerous and enterprising generation of writers will follow and surpass the present one; but it would be better if the stream were stayed, and the roll of our old, honest English books were closed, than that esurient book-makers should continue and debase a brave tradition, and lower, in their own eyes, a famous race. Better that our serene temples were deserted than filled with trafficking and juggling priests.

There are two just reasons for the choice of any way of life: the first is inbred taste in the chooser; the second some high utility in the industry selected. Literature, like any other art, is singularly interesting to the artist; and, in a degree peculiar to itself among the arts, it is useful to mankind. These are the sufficient justifications for any young man or woman who adopts it as the business of his life. I shall not say much about the wages. A writer can live by his writing. If not so luxuriously as by other trades, then less luxuriously. The nature of the work he does all day will more affect his happiness than the quality of his dinner at night. Whatever be your calling, and however much it brings you in the year, you could still, you know, get more by cheating. We all suffer ourselves to be too much concerned about a little poverty; but such considerations should not move

us in the choice of that which is to be the business and justification of so great a portion of our lives; and like the missionary, the patriot, or the philosopher, we should all choose that poor and brave career in which we can do the most and best for mankind. Now nature, faithfully followed, proves herself a careful mother. A lad, for some liking to the jingle of words, betakes himself to letters for his life; by-and-by, when he learns more gravity, he finds that he has chosen better than he knew; that if he earns little, he is earning it amply; that if he receives a small wage, he is in a position to do considerable services; that it is his power, in some small measure, to protect the oppressed and to defend the truth. So kindly is the world arranged, such great profit may arise from a small degree of human reliance on oneself, and such, in particular, is the happy star of this trade of writing, that it should combine pleasure and profit to both parties, and be at once agreeable, like fiddling, and useful, like good preaching.

This is to speak of literature at its highest; and with the four great elders who are still spared to our respect and admiration, with Carlyle, Ruskin, Browning, and Tennyson before us, it would be cowardly to consider it at first in any lesser aspect. But while we cannot follow these athletes, while we may none of us, perhaps, be very vigorous, very original, or very wise, I still contend that, in the humblest sort of literary work, we have it in our power either to do great harm or great good. We may seek merely to please; we may seek, having no higher gift, merely to gratify the idle nine days' curiosity of our contemporaries; or we may essay, however feebly, to instruct. In each of these we shall have to deal with that remarkable art of words which,

because it is the dialect of life, comes home so easily and powerfully to the minds of men; and since that is so, we contribute, in each of these branches, to build up the sum of sentiments and appreciations which goes by the name of Public Opinion or Public Feeling. The total of a nation's reading, in these days of daily papers, greatly modifies the total of the nation's speech; and the speech and reading, taken together, form the efficient educational medium of youth. A good man or woman may keep a youth some little while in clearer air; but the contemporary atmosphere is all-powerful in the end on the average of mediocre characters. The copious Corinthian baseness of the American reporter or the Parisian *chroniqueur*, both so lightly readable, must exercise an incalculable influence for ill; they touch upon all subjects, and on all with the same ungenerous hand; they begin the consideration of all, in young and unprepared minds, in an unworthy spirit; on all, they supply some pungency for dull people to quote. The mere body of this ugly matter overwhelms the rare utterances of good men; the sneering, the selfish, and the cowardly are scattered in broad sheets on every table, while the antidote, in small volumes, lies unread upon the shelf. I have spoken of the American and the French, not because they are so much baser, but so much more readable, than the English; their evil is done more effectively, in America for the masses, in French for the few that care to read; but with us as with them, the duties of literature are daily neglected, truth daily perverted and suppressed, and grave subjects daily degraded in the treatment. The journalist is not reckoned an important officer; yet judge of the good he might do, the harm he does; judge of it by one instance only: that

when we find two journals on the reverse sides of politics each, on the same day, openly garbling a piece of news for the interest of its own party, we smile at the discovery (no discovery now!) as over a good joke and pardonable stratagem. Lying so open is scarce lying, it is true; but one of the things that we profess to teach our young is a respect for truth; and I cannot think this piece of education will be crowned with any great success, so long as some of us practise and the rest openly approve of public falsehood.

There are two duties incumbent upon any man who enters on the business of writing: truth to the fact and a good spirit in the treatment. In every department of literature, though so low as hardly to deserve the name, truth to the fact is of importance to the education and comfort of mankind, and so hard to preserve, that the faithful trying to do so will lend some dignity to the man who tries it. Our judgments are based upon two things: first, upon the original preferences of our soul; but, second, upon the mass of testimony to the nature of God, man, and the universe which reaches us, in divers manners, from without. For the most part these divers manners are reducible to one, all that we learn of past times and much that we learn of our own reaching us through the medium of books or papers, and even he who cannot read learning from the same source at second-hand and by the report of him who can. Thus the sum of the contemporary knowledge or ignorance of good and evil is, in large measure, the handiwork of those who write. Those who write have to see that each man's knowledge is, as near as they can make it, answerable to the facts of life; that he shall not suppose himself an angel or a monster; nor take this world for

a hell; nor be suffered to imagine that all rights are concentred in his own caste or country, or all veracities in his own parochial creed. Each man should learn what is within him, that he may strive to mend; he must be taught what is without him, that he may be kind to others. It can never be wrong to tell him the truth; for, in his disputable state, weaving as he goes his theory of life, steering himself, cheering or reproving others, all facts are of the first importance to his conduct; and even if a fact shall discourage or corrupt him, it is still best that he should know it; for it is in this world as it is, and not in a world made easy by educational suppressions, that he must win his way to shame or glory. In one word, it must always be foul to tell what is false; and it can never be safe to suppress what is true. The very fact that you omit may be the fact which somebody was wanting, for one man's meat is another man's poison, and I have known a person who was cheered by the perusal of *Candide*. Every fact is a part of that great puzzle we must set together; and none that comes directly in a writer's path but has some nice relations, unperceivable by him, to the totality and bearing of the subject under hand. Yet there are certain classes of fact eternally more necessary than others, and it is with these that literature must first bestir itself. They are not hard to distinguish, nature once more easily leading us; for the necessary, because the efficacious, facts are those which are most interesting to the natural mind of man. Those which are coloured, picturesque, human, and rooted in morality, and those, on the other hand, which are clear, indisputable, and a part of science, are alone vital in importance, seizing by their interest, or useful to communicate. So far as the writer merely nar-

rates, he should principally tell of these. He should tell of the kind and wholesome and beautiful elements of our life; he should tell unsparingly of the evil and sorrow of the present, to move us with instances; he should tell of wise and good people in the past, to excite us by example; and of these he should tell soberly and truthfully, not glossing faults, that we may neither grow discouraged with ourselves nor exacting to our neighbours. So the body of contemporary literature, ephemeral and feeble in itself, touches in the minds of men the springs of thought and kindness, and supports them (for those who will go at all are easily supported) on their way to what is true and right. And if, in any degree, it does so now, how much more might it do so if the writers chose! There is not a life in all the records of the past but, properly studied, might lend a hint and a help to some contemporary. There is not a juncture in to-day's affairs but some useful word may yet be said of it. Even the reporter has an office, and, with clear eyes and honest language, may unveil injustices and point the way to progress. And for a last word: in all narration there is only one way to be clever, and that is to be exact. To be vivid is a secondary quality which must presuppose the first; for vividly to convey a wrong impression is only to make failure conspicuous.

But a fact may be viewed on many sides; it may be chronicled with rage, tears, laughter, indifference, or admiration, and by each of these the story will be transformed to something else. The newspapers that told of the return of our representatives from Berlin, even if they had not differed as to the facts, would have sufficiently differed by their spirits; so that the one description would have been a second ovation, and the other a

prolonged insult. The subject makes but a trifling part of any piece of literature, and the view of the writer is itself a fact more important because less disputable than the others. Now this spirit in which a subject is regarded, important in all kinds of literary work, becomes all-important in works of fiction, meditation, or rhapsody; for there it not only colours but itself chooses the facts; not only modifies but shapes the work. And hence, over the far larger proportion of the field of literature, the health or disease of the writer's mind or momentary humour forms not only the leading feature of his work, but is, at bottom, the only thing he can communicate to others. In all works of art, widely speaking, it is first of all the author's attitude that is narrated, though in the attitude there be implied a whole experience and a theory of life. An author who has begged the question and reposes in some narrow faith cannot, if he would, express the whole or even many of the sides of this various existence; for, his own life being maim, some of them are not admitted in his theory, and were only dimly and unwillingly recognised in his experience. Hence the smallness, the triteness, and the inhumanity in works of merely sectarian religion; and hence we find equal although unsimilar limitation in works inspired by the spirit of the flesh or the despicable taste for high society. So that the first duty of any man who is to write is intellectual. Designedly or not, he has so far set himself up for a leader of the minds of men; and he must see that his own mind is kept supple, charitable, and bright. Everything but prejudice should find a voice through him; he should see the good in all things; where he has even a fear that he does not wholly understand, there he should be wholly

silent; and he should recognise from the first that he has only one tool in his workshop, and that tool is sympathy.[1]

The second duty, far harder to define, is moral. There are a thousand different humours in the mind, and about each of them, when it is uppermost, some literature tends to be deposited. Is this to be allowed? Not certainly in every case, and yet perhaps in more than rigourists would fancy. It were to be desired that all literary work, and chiefly works of art, issued from sound, human, healthy, and potent impulses, whether grave or laughing, humorous, romantic, or religious. Yet it cannot be denied that some valuable books are partially insane; some, mostly religious, partially inhuman; and very many tainted with morbidity and impotence. We do not loathe a masterpiece although we gird against its blemishes. We are not, above all, to look for faults, but merits. There is no book perfect, even in design; but there are many that will delight, improve, or encourage the reader. On the one hand, the Hebrew psalms are the only religious poetry on earth; yet they contain sallies that savour rankly of the man of blood. On the other hand, Alfred de Musset had a poisoned and a contorted nature; I am only quoting that generous and frivolous giant, old Dumas, when I accuse him of a bad heart; yet, when the impulse under which he wrote was purely creative, he could give us works like *Carmosine* or *Fantasio*, in which the last note of the

[1] A footnote, at least, is due to the admirable example set before all young writers in the width of literary sympathy displayed by Mr. Swinburne. He runs forth to welcome merit, whether in Dickens or Trollope, whether in Villon, Milton, or Pope. This is, in criticism, the attitude we should all seek to preserve, not only in that, but in every branch of literary work. — *Author.*

romantic comedy seems to have been found again to touch and please us. When Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary*, I believe he thought chiefly of a somewhat morbid realism; and behold! the book turned in his hands into a masterpiece of appalling morality. But the truth is, when books are conceived under a great stress, with a soul of ninefold power, nine times heated and electrified by effort, the conditions of our being are seized with such an ample grasp, that, even should the main design be trivial or base, some truth and beauty cannot fail to be expressed. Out of the strong comes forth sweetness; but an ill thing poorly done is an ill thing top and bottom. And so this can be no encouragement to knock-kneed, feeble-wristed scribes, who must take their business conscientiously or be ashamed to practise it.

Man is imperfect; yet, in his literature, he must express himself and his own views and preferences; for to do anything else is to do a far more perilous thing than to risk being immoral: it is to be sure of being untrue. To ape a sentiment, even a good one, is to travesty a sentiment; that will not be helpful. To conceal a sentiment, if you are sure you hold it, is to take a liberty with truth. There is probably no point of view possible to a sane man but contains some truth and, in the true connection, might be profitable to the race. I am not afraid of the truth, if any one could tell it me, but I am afraid of parts of it impertinently uttered. There is a time to dance and a time to mourn; to be harsh as well as to be sentimental; to be ascetic as well as to glorify the appetites; and if a man were to combine all these extremes into his work, each in its place and proportion, that work would be the world's masterpiece of morality

as well as of art. Partiality is immorality; for any book is wrong that gives a misleading picture of the world and life. The trouble is that the weakling must be partial; the work of one proving dank and depressing; of another, cheap and vulgar; of a third, epileptically sensual; of a fourth, sourly ascetic. In literature as in conduct, you can never hope to do exactly right. All you can do is to make as sure as possible; and for that there is but one rule. Nothing should be done in a hurry that can be done slowly. It is no use to write a book and put it by for nine or even ninety years; for in the writing you will have partly convinced yourself; the delay must precede any beginning; and if you meditate a work of art, you should first long roll the subject under the tongue to make sure you like the flavour, before you brew a volume that shall taste of it from end to end; or if you propose to enter on the field of controversy, you should first have thought upon the question under all conditions, in health as well as in sickness, in sorrow as well as in joy. It is this nearness of examination necessary for any true and kind writing, that makes the practice of the art a prolonged and noble education for the writer.

There is plenty to do, plenty to say, or to say over again, in the meantime. Any literary work which conveys faithful facts or pleasing impressions is a service to the public. It is even a service to be thankfully proud of having rendered. The slightest novels are a blessing to those in distress, not chloroform itself a greater. Our fine old sea-captain's life was justified when Carlyle soothed his mind with *The King's Own* or *Newton Forster*. To please is to serve; and so far from its being difficult to instruct while you amuse, it is difficult to do

the one thoroughly without the other. Some part of the writer or his life will crop out in even a vapid book; and to read a novel that was conceived with any force is to multiply experience and to exercise the sympathies. Every article, every piece of verse, every essay, every *entre-fiet*, is destined to pass, however swiftly, through the minds of some portion of the public, and to colour, however transiently, their thoughts. When any subject falls to be discussed, some scribbler on a paper has the invaluable opportunity of beginning its discussion in a dignified and human spirit; and if there were enough who did so in our public press, neither the public nor the Parliament would find it in their minds to drop to meaner thoughts. The writer has the chance to stumble, by the way, on something pleasing, something interesting, something encouraging, were it only to a single reader. He will be unfortunate, indeed, if he suit no one. He has the chance, besides, to stumble on something that a dull person shall be able to comprehend; and for a dull person to have read anything and, for that once, comprehended it, makes a marking epoch in his education.

Here, then, is work worth doing and worth trying to do well. And so, if I were minded to welcome any great accession to our trade, it should not be from any reason of a higher wage, but because it was a trade which was useful in a very great and in a very high degree; which every honest tradesman could make more serviceable to mankind in his single strength; which was difficult to do well and possible to do better every year; which called for scrupulous thought on the part of all who practised it, and hence became a perpetual education to their nobler natures; and which, pay it as you please, in the

large majority of the best cases will still be underpaid. For surely, at this time of day in the nineteenth century, there is nothing that an honest man should fear more timorously than getting and spending more than he deserves.

ADVICE TO A YOUNG REVIEWER

EDWARD COPLESTON

1776–1849

This satirical essay was first published in the form of a pamphlet, at Oxford, in 1807. The fact that it is more than a century old does not prevent it from reading as if it had been written about the sins of some twentieth-century reviewers. Students especially, when they write their first reviews for publication, feel that they must say something striking and pretentious, even at the cost of misrepresenting an author's painstaking, his capacity for constructive thought, or his genius for expression.

The author of *Advice to a Young Reviewer* was a writer, a professor of poetry at Oxford University, and a bishop in the Anglican church.

YOU are now about to enter on a profession which has the means of doing much good to society, and scarcely any temptation to do harm. You may encourage genius, you may chastise superficial arrogance, expose falsehood, correct error, and guide the taste and opinions of the age in no small degree by the books you praise and recommend. All this too may be done without running the risk of making any enemies, or subjecting yourself to be called to account for your criticism, however severe. While your name is unknown, your person is invulnerable: at the same time your own aim is sure, for you may take it at your leisure; and your blows fall heavier than those of any writer whose name is given, or who is simply anonymous. There is a mysterious authority in the plural *we*, which no single name, whatever may be its reputation, can acquire; and under the sanction of this imposing style

your strictures, your praises, and your dogmas will command universal attention, and be received as the fruit of united talents, acting on one common principle — as the judgments of a tribunal who decide only on mature deliberation, and who protect the interests of literature with unceasing vigilance.

Such being the high importance of that office, and such its opportunities, I cannot bestow a few hours of leisure better than in furnishing you with some hints for the more easy and effectual discharge of it: hints which are, I confess, loosely thrown together, but which are the result of long experience, and of frequent reflection and comparison. And if anything should strike you at first sight as rather equivocal in point of morality, or deficient in liberality and feeling, I beg you will suppress all such scruples, and consider them as the offspring of a contracted education and narrow way of thinking, which a little intercourse with the world and sober reasoning will speedily overcome.

Now, as in the conduct of life nothing is more to be desired than some governing principle of action, to which all other principles and motives must be made subservient, so in the art of reviewing I would lay down as a fundamental position, which you must never lose sight of, and which must be the mainspring of all your criticisms — *write what will sell.* To this golden rule every minor canon must be subordinate, and must be either immediately deducible from it, or at least be made consistent with it. Be not staggered at the sound of a precept, which upon examination will be found as honest and virtuous as it is discreet. I have already sketched out the great services which it is in your power to render mankind; but all your efforts would be unavailing if

men did not read what you write. Your utility therefore, it is plain, depends upon your popularity; and popularity cannot be attained without humouring the taste and inclinations of men.

Be assured that by a similar train of sound and judicious reasoning the consciences of thousands in public life are daily quieted. It is better for the State that their party should govern than any other; the good which they can effect by the exercise of power is infinitely greater than any which could arise from a rigid adherence to certain subordinate moral precepts, which therefore should be violated without scruple whenever they stand in the way of their leading purpose. He who sticks at these can never act a great part in the world, and is not fit to act it if he could. Such maxims may be very useful in ordinary affairs, and for the guidance of ordinary men; but when we mount into the sphere of public utility, we must adopt more enlarged principles, and not suffer ourselves to be cramped and fettered by petty notions of right and moral duty.

When you have reconciled yourself to this liberal way of thinking, you will find many inferior advantages resulting from it, which at first did not enter into your consideration. In particular, it will greatly lighten your labours to *follow* the public taste, instead of taking upon you to *direct* it. The task of pleasing is at all times easier than that of instructing: at least it does not stand in need of painful research and preparation, and may be effected in general by a little vivacity of manner, and a dexterous morigeration (as Lord Bacon calls it) to the humours and frailties of men. Your responsibility, too, is thereby much lessened. Justice and candour can only be required of you so far as they coincide with this main

principle; and a little experience will convince you that these are not the happiest means of accomplishing your purpose.

It has been idly said, that a Reviewer acts in a judicial capacity, and that his conduct should be regulated by the same rules by which the Judge of a civil court is governed; that he should rid himself of every bias; be patient, cautious, sedate, and rigidly impartial; that he should not seek to show off himself, and should check every disposition to enter into the case as a partisan.

Such is the language of superficial thinkers; but in reality there is no analogy between the two cases. A Judge is promoted to that office by the authority of the State; a Reviewer by his own. The former is independent of control, and may therefore freely follow the dictates of his own conscience; the latter depends for his very bread upon the breath of public opinion: the great law of self-preservation therefore points out to him a different line of action. Besides, as we have already observed, if he ceases to please he is no longer read, and consequently is no longer useful. In a court of justice, too, the part of amusing the bystanders rests with the counsel: in the case of criticism, if the Reviewer himself does not undertake it, who will? Instead of vainly aspiring therefore to the gravity of a magistrate, I would advise him, when he sits down to write, to place himself in the imaginary situation of a cross-examining pleader. He may comment, in a vein of agreeable irony, upon the profession, the manner of life, the look, dress, or even the name of the witness he is examining: when he has raised a contemptuous opinion of him in the minds of the court, he may proceed to draw answers from him capable of a ludicrous turn, and he may carve and garble

these to his own liking. This mode of proceeding you will find most practicable in poetry, where the boldness of the image, or the delicacy of thought, for which the reader's mind was prepared in the original, will easily be made to appear extravagant or affected, if judiciously singled out and detached from the group to which it belongs. Again, since much depends upon the rhythm and the terseness of expression, both of which are sometimes destroyed by dropping a single word, or transposing a phrase, I have known much advantage arise from not quoting in the form of a literal extract, but giving a brief summary in prose of the contents of a poetical passage; and interlarding your own language with occasional phrases of the poem, marked with inverted commas. These, and a thousand other little expedients, by which the arts of quizzing and banter flourish, practice will soon teach you. If it should be necessary to transcribe a dull passage, not very fertile in topics of humour and raillery, you may introduce it as a "favourable specimen of the author's manner."

Few people are aware of the powerful effects of what is philosophically termed association. Without any positive violation of truth, the whole dignity of a passage may be undermined by contriving to raise some vulgar and ridiculous notions in the mind of the reader; and language teems with examples of words by which the same idea is expressed, with the difference only that one excites a feeling of respect, the other of contempt. Thus, you may call a fit of melancholy "the sulks," resentment "a pet," a steed "a nag," a feast "a junketing," sorrow and affliction "whining and blubbering." By transferring the terms peculiar to one state of society to analogous situations and characters in another, the

same object is attained, a drill-sergeant or a cat-and-nine-tails in the Trojan War, a Lesbos smack put into the Piræus, the penny-post of Jerusalem, and other combinations of the like nature, which, when you have a little indulged that vein of thought, will readily suggest themselves, never fail to raise a smile, if not immediately at the expense of the author, yet entirely destructive of that frame of mind which his poem requires in order to be relished.

I have dwelt the longer on this branch of literature, because you are chiefly to look here for materials of fun and irony. Voyages and travels indeed are no barren ground, and you must seldom let a number of your Review go abroad without an article of this description. The charm of this species of writing, so universally felt, arises chiefly from its uniting narrative with information. The interest we take in the story can only be kept alive by minute incident and occasional detail, which puts us in possession of the traveller's feelings, his hopes, his fears, his disappointments, and his pleasures. At the same time the thirst for knowledge and love of novelty is gratified by continual information respecting the people and countries he visits. If you wish, therefore, to run down the book, you have only to play off these two parts against each other: when the writer's object is to satisfy the first inclination, you are to thank him for communicating to the world such valuable facts — as whether he lost his way in the night — or sprained his ankle — or had no appetite to his dinner. If he is busied about describing the mineralogy, natural history, agriculture, trade, &c., of a country, you may mention a hundred books from whence the same information may be obtained, and deprecate the practice of emptying old

musty folios into new quartos, to gratify that sickly taste for a smattering about everything which distinguishes the present age.

In works of science and recondite learning, the task you have undertaken will not be so difficult as you may imagine. Tables of contents and indexes are blessed helps in the hands of a Reviewer; but, more than all, the preface is the field from which his richest harvest is to be gathered. In the preface the author usually gives a summary of what has been written on the same subject before; he acknowledges the assistance he has received from different sources, and the reasons of his dissent from former writers; he confesses that certain parts have been less attentively considered than others, and that information has come to his hands too late to be made use of; he points out many things in the composition of his work which he thinks may provoke animadversion, and endeavours to defend or to palliate his own practice. Here then is a fund of wealth for the Reviewer, lying upon the very surface; if he knows anything of his business, he will turn all these materials against the author, carefully suppressing the source of his information, and as if drawing from the stores of his own mind, long ago laid up for this very purpose. If the author's references are correct, a great point is gained; for, by consulting a few passages of the original works, it will be easy to discuss the subject with the air of having a previous knowledge of the whole. Your chief vantage-ground is that you may fasten upon any position in the book you are reviewing, and treat it as principal and essential, when perhaps it is of little weight in the main argument; but, by allotting a large share of your criticism to it, the reader will naturally be led to give it a proportionate

importance, and to consider the merit of the treatise at issue upon that single question. If anybody complains that the greater and more valuable parts remain unnoticed, your answer it is that it is possible to pay attention to all, and that your duty is rather to prevent the propagation of error than to lavish praises upon that which, if really excellent, will work its way in the world without your help. Indeed, if the plan of your Review admits of selection, you had better not meddle with works of deep research and original speculation, such as have already attracted much notice, and cannot be treated superficially without fear of being found out. The time required for making yourself thoroughly master of the subject is so great, that you may depend upon it they will never pay for the reviewing. They are generally the fruit of long study, and of talents concentrated in the steady pursuit of one object; it is not likely therefore that you can throw much new light on a question of this nature, or even plausibly combat the author's positions in the course of a few hours, which is all you can well afford to devote to them. And, without accomplishing one or other of these points, your review will gain no celebrity, and of course no good will be done.

Enough has been said to give you some insight into the facilities with which your new employment abounds: I will only mention one more, because of its extensive and almost universal application to all branches of literature— the topic, I mean, which by the old Rhetoricians was called ἐξ ἐναντίων. That is, when a work excels in one quality, you may blame it for not having the opposite. For instance, if the biographical sketch of a literary character is minute and full of anecdote, you may enlarge on the advantages of philosophical reflection, and

the superior mind required to give a judicious analysis of the opinions and works of deceased authors; on the contrary, if the latter method is pursued by the biographer, you can with equal ease extol the lively colouring and truth and interest of exact delineation and detail. This topic, you will perceive, enters into style as well as matter, where many virtues might be named which are incompatible; and, whichever the author has preferred, it will be the signal for you to launch forth on the praises of its opposite, and continually to hold up that to your reader as the model of excellence in this species of writing.

You will, perhaps, wonder why all my instructions are pointed towards the censure and not the praise of books; but many reasons might be given why it should be so. The chief are, that this part is both easier, and will sell better. Let us hear the words of Mr. Burke on a subject not very dissimilar: "In such cases," says he, "the writer has a certain fire and alacrity inspired into him by a consciousness that, let it fare how it will with the subject, his ingenuity will be sure of applause; and this alacrity becomes much greater, if he acts upon the offensive, by the impetuosity that always accompanies an attack, and the unfortunate propensity which mankind have to the finding and exaggerating faults." (Preface *Vindic. Nat. Soc.*, p. 6.) You will perceive that I have on no occasion sanctioned the baser motives of private pique, envy, revenge, and love of detraction; at least, I have not recommended harsh treatment upon any of these grounds; I have argued simply on the abstract moral principle which a Reviewer should ever have present to his mind: but if any of these motives insinuate themselves as secondary springs of action, I

would not condemn them; they may come in aid of the grand leading principle, and powerfully second its operation.

But it is time to close these tedious precepts, and to furnish you with what speaks plainer than any precept, a specimen of the art itself, in which several of them are embodied. It is hastily done, but it exemplifies well enough what I have said of the poetical department, and exhibits most of those qualities which disappointed authors are fond of railing at, under the names of flippancy, arrogance, conceit, misrepresentation, and malevolence; reproaches which you will only regard as so many acknowledgments of success in your undertaking, and infallible tests of an established fame and rapidly increasing circulation.

L'Allegro: a Poem. By John Milton.
No Printer's name.

It has become a practice of late with a certain description of people, who have no visible means of subsistence, to string together a few trite images of rural scenery, interspersed with vulgarisms in dialect and traits of vulgar manners; to dress up these materials in a sing-song jingle, and to offer them for sale as a poem. According to the most approved recipes, something about the heathen gods and goddesses, and the schoolboy topics of Styx, and Cerberus, and Elysium, is occasionally thrown in, and the composition is complete. The stock-in-trade of these adventurers is in general scanty enough, and their art therefore consists in disposing it to the best advantage. But if such be the aim of the writer, it is the critic's business to detect and defeat the imposture; to warn the public against the purchase of shop-worn

goods and tinsel wares; to protect the fair trader, by exposing the tricks of needy quacks and mountebanks; and to chastise that forward and noisy importunity with which they present themselves to the public notice.

How far Mr. Milton is amenable to this discipline will best appear from a brief analysis of the poem before us. In the very opening he assumes a tone of authority, which might better suit some veteran bard than a raw candidate for the Delphic bays: for, before he proceeds to the regular process of invocation, he clears the way by driving from his presence, with sundry hard names and bitter reproaches on her father, mother, and all the family, a venerable personage, whose age at least, and staid matron-like appearance, might have entitled her to more civil language.

> Hence, loathed Melancholy;
> Of Cerberus and blackest midnight born,
> In Stygian cave forlorn, &c.

There is no giving rules, however, in these matters, without a knowledge of the case. Perhaps the old lady had been frequently warned off before, and provoked this violence by continuing still to lurk about the poet's dwelling. And, to say the truth, the reader will have but too good reason to remark, before he gets through the poem, that it is one thing to tell the spirit of dulness to depart, and another to get rid of her in reality. Like Glendower's spirits, any one may order them away, "but will they go when you do order them?"

But let us suppose for a moment that the Parnassian decree is obeyed, and according to the letter of the *order*, which is as precise and wordy as if Justice Shallow him-

self had drawn it, that the obnoxious female is sent back to the place of her birth,

'Mongst horrid shapes, shrieks, sights, &c.,

at which we beg our fair readers not to be alarmed, for we can assure them they are only words of course in all poetical instruments of this nature, and mean no more than the "force and arms," and "instigation of the devil" in a common indictment. This nuisance then being abated, we are left at liberty to contemplate a character of a different complexion, "buxom, blithe, and debonair," one who, although evidently a great favourite of the poet's, and therefore to be received with all due courtesy, is notwithstanding introduced under the suspicious description of an *alias:*

In heaven ycleped Euphrosyne,
And by men, heart-easing Mirth.

Judging indeed from the light and easy deportment of this gay nymph, one might guess there were good reasons for a change of name as she changed her residence.

But of all vices there is none we abhor more than that of slanderous insinuation; we shall, therefore, confine our moral strictures to the nymph's mother, in whose defence the poet has little to say himself. Here too, as in the case of the *name*, there is some doubt: for the uncertainty of descent on the father's side having become trite to a proverb, the author, scorning that beaten track, has left us to choose between two mothers for his favourite, and without much to guide our choice; for, whichever we fix upon, it is plain she was no better than she should be. As he seems, however, himself inclined to the latter of the two, we will even suppose it so to be:

Or whether (as some sager sing)
The frolic *wind that breathes the spring*,
Zephyr with Aurora playing,
As he met her once a-Maying,
There on beds of violets blue,
And fresh-blown roses washed in dew, &c.

Some dull people might imagine that the wind was more like the breath of spring, than spring the breath of the wind; but we are more disposed to question the author's ethics than his physics, and accordingly cannot dismiss these May gambols without some observations.

In the first place, Mr. M. seems to have higher notions of the antiquity of the Maypole than we have been accustomed to attach to it. Or perhaps he thought to shelter the equivocal nature of this affair under that sanction. To us, however, who can hardly subscribe to the doctrine that "vice loses half its evil by losing all its grossness," neither the remoteness of time nor the gaiety of the season furnishes a sufficient palliation. "Violets blue" and "fresh-blown roses" are, to be sure, more agreeable objects of the imagination than a ginshop in Wapping or a booth in Bartholomew Fair; but in point of morality these are distinctions without a difference; or, it may be, the cultivation of mind, which teaches us to reject and nauseate these latter objects, aggravates the case if our improvement in taste be not accompanied by a proportionate improvement of morals.

If the reader can reconcile himself to this latitude of principle, the anachronism will not long stand in his way. Much, indeed, may be said in favour of this union of ancient mythology with modern notions and manners. It is a sort of chronological metaphor — an artificial analogy, by which ideas, widely remote and heter-

ogeneous, are brought into contact, and the mind is delighted by this unexpected assemblage, as it is by the combinations of figurative language.

Thus in that elegant interlude, which the pen of Ben Jonson has transmitted to us, of the loves of Hero and Leander:

> Gentles, that no longer your expectations may wander,
> Behold our chief actor, amorous Leander,
> With a great deal of cloth, lapped about him like a scarf,
> For he yet serves his father, a dyer in Puddle Wharf;
> Which place we'll make bold with, to call it our Abydus,
> As the Bank side is our Sestos, and *let it not be denied us.*

And far be it from us to deny the use of so reasonable a liberty; especially if the request be backed (as it is in the case of Mr. M.) by the craving and imperious necessities of rhyme. What man who has ever bestrode Pegasus but for an hour, will be insensible to such a claim?

> Haud ignara mali miseris succurrere disco.

We are next favoured with an enumeration of the attendants of this "debonair" nymph, in all the minuteness of a German dramatis personæ, or a rope-dancer's hand-bill:

> Haste thee, nymph, and bring with thee
> Jest, and youthful Jollity;
> Quips, and cranks, and wanton wiles,
> Nods, and becks, and wreathèd smiles,
> Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,
> And love to live in dimple sleek;
> Sport that wrinkled Care derides,
> And Laughter, holding both his sides.

The author, to prove himself worthy of being admitted of the crew, skips and capers about upon "the light fantastic toe," so that there is no following him. He scampers

through all the categories, in search of his imaginary beings, from substance to quality, and back again; from thence to action, passion, habit, &c., with incredible celerity. Who, for instance, would have expected *cranks*, *nods*, *becks*, and *wreathèd smiles* as part of a group, in which Jest, Jollity, Sport and Laughter figure away as full-formed entire personages? The family likeness is certainly very strong in the two last, and if we had not been told we should perhaps have thought the act of *deriding* as appropriate to laughter as to sport.

But how are we to understand the stage directions?

> *Come*, and trip it as you *go*.

Are the words used synonymously? Or is it meant that this airy gentry shall come in at a minuet step, and go off in a jig? The phenomenon of a *tripping crank* is indeed novel, and would doubtless attract numerous spectators. But it is difficult to guess to whom among this jolly company the poet addresses himself, for immediately after the plural appellative [you], he proceeds:

> And in *thy* right hand lead with *thee*
> The mountain nymph, sweet Liberty.

No sooner is this fair damsel introduced, but Mr. M., with most unbecoming levity, falls in love with her, and makes a request of her companion, which is rather greedy, that he may live with both of them:

> To live with her, and live with thee.

Even the gay libertine who sung, "How happy could I be with either," did not go so far as this. But we have already had occasion to remark on the laxity of Mr. M.'s amatory notions.

The poet, intoxicated with the charms of his mistress, now rapidly runs over the pleasures which he proposes to himself in the enjoyment of her society. But though he has the advantage of being his own caterer, either his palate is of a peculiar structure, or he has not made the most judicious selection. To begin the day well, he will have the *skylark*

> to come in *spite of sorrow*,
> And at his window bid good morrow.

The skylark, if we know anything of the nature of that bird, must come in spite of something else as well as of sorrow, to the performance of this office. In his next image the natural history is better preserved, and as the thoughts are appropriate to the time of the day, we will venture to transcribe the passage, as a favourable specimen of the author's manner:

> While the cock with lively din
> Scatters the rear of darkness thin,
> And to the stack, or the barn-door,
> Stoutly struts his dames before;
> Oft listening how the hounds and horn
> Cheerly rouse the slumbering morn,
> From the side of some hoar hill,
> Through the high wood echoing shrill.

Is it not lamentable that, after all, whether it is the cock or the poet that listens, should be left entirely to the reader's conjecture? Perhaps also his embarrassment may be increased by a slight resemblance of character in these two illustrious personages, at least as far as relates to the extent and numbers of their seraglio.

After a *flaming* description of sunrise, on which occasion the clouds attend in their very best liveries, the bill

of fare for the day proceeds in the usual manner. Whistling ploughmen, singing milkmaids, and sentimental shepherds are always to be had at a moment's notice, and, if well grouped, serve to fill up the landscape agreeably enough. On this part of the poem we have only to remark, that if Mr. John Milton proposes to make himself merry with

> Russet lawns, and fallows grey,
> Where the nibbling flocks *do* stray;
> Mountains on whose barren breast
> The labouring clouds *do* often rest,
> Meadows trim with daisies pied,
> Shallow brooks, and rivers wide,
> Towers and battlements, &c. &c. &c.,

he will either find himself egregiously disappointed, or he must possess a disposition to merriment which even Democritus himself might envy. To such a pitch indeed does this solemn indication of joy sometimes rise, that we are inclined to give him credit for a literal adherence to the Apostolic precept, "Is any merry, let him sing psalms."

At length, however, he hies away at the sound of bell-ringing, and seems for some time to enjoy the tippling and fiddling and dancing of a village wake; but his fancy is soon haunted again by spectres and goblins, a set of beings not in general esteemed the companions or inspirers of mirth.

> With stories told of many a feat,
> How fairy Mab the junkets eat;
> She was pinched, and pulled, she said;
> And he, by friar's lanthern led,
> Tells how the drudging goblin sweat
> To earn his cream-bowl duly set;

When in one night, ere glimpse of morn,
His shadowy flail hath threshed the corn,
That ten day-labourers could not end;
Then lies him down the lubbar fiend,
And, stretched out all the chimney's length,
Basks at the fire his hairy strength;
And crop-full out of door he flings,
Ere the first cock his matin rings.

Mr. M. seems indeed to have a turn for this species of nursery tales and prattling lullabies; and if he will studiously cultivate his talent he need not despair of figuring in a conspicuous corner of Mr. Newbury's shop-window; unless indeed Mrs. Trimmer should think fit to proscribe those empty levities and idle superstitions by which the world has been too long abused.

From these rustic fictions we are transported to another species of *hum:*

Towered cities please us then,
And the busy hum of men,
Where throngs of knights and barons bold
In weeds of peace high triumphs hold,
With *store of ladies*, whose bright eyes
Rain influence, and judge the prize
Of wit or arms, while both contend
To win her grace, whom all commend.

To talk of the bright eyes of ladies judging the prize of wit is indeed with the poets a legitimate species of humming: but would not, we may ask, the *rain* from these ladies' bright eyes rather tend to dim their lustre? Or is there any quality in a shower of *influence*, which, instead of deadening, serves only to brighten and exhilarate? Whatever the case may be, we would advise Mr. M. by all means to keep out of the way of these knights and barons bold; for if he has nothing but his wit to trust to,

we will venture to predict that, without a large share of most undue *influence*, he must be content to see the prize adjudged to his competitors.

Of the latter part of the poem little need be said. The author does seem somewhat more at home when he gets among the actors and musicians, though his head is still running upon Orpheus and Eurydice, and Pluto, and other sombre gentry, who are ever thrusting themselves in where we least expect them, and who chill every rising emotion of mirth and gaiety.

He appears, however, to be so ravished with this sketch of festive pleasures, or perhaps with himself for having sketched them so well, that he closes with a couplet, which would not have disgraced a Sternhold:

> These delights if thou canst give,
> Mirth, with thee I *mean* to live.

Of Mr. M.'s good *intentions* there can be no doubt; but we beg leave to remind him that in every compact of this nature there are two opinions to be consulted. He presumes, perhaps, upon the poetical powers he has displayed, and considers them as irresistible; for every one must observe in how different a strain he avows his attachment now and at the opening of the poem. Then it was,

> If I give thee honour due,
> Mirth, admit me of thy crew.

But having, it should seem, established his pretensions, he now thinks it sufficient to give notice that he means to live with her, because he likes her.

Upon the whole, Mr. Milton seems to be possessed of some fancy and talent for rhyming; two most dangerous endowments, which often unfit men for acting a useful

part in life, without qualifying them for that which is great and brilliant. If it be true, as we have heard, that he has declined advantageous prospects in business for the sake of indulging his poetical humour, we hope it is not yet too late to prevail upon him to retract his resolution. With the help of Cocker and common industry he may become a respectable scrivener; but it is not all the Zephyrs, and Auroras, and Corydons, and Thyrsises, aye, nor his junketing Queen Mab and drudging goblins, that will ever make him a poet.

III. FICTIONAL NARRATIVE

WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS ABOUT EXPRESSION AND SOMETHING WHICH ALL THE WORLD DOES NOT KNOW[1]

DENIS DIDEROT

1713–1784

THE two very short articles which follow are taken from Diderot's *Thoughts on Art and Style*, a volume of translations from the *Encyclopedia* and the *Salons* made by Beatrix L. Tollemache (Hon. Mrs. Lionel Tollemache) and published by Rivingtons, London (Second edition, 1904). Of course Diderot speaks here more especially of painting and sculpture, but his observations bear with such directness upon expression in writing, that these two passages deserve a place in a volume on literary art.

Sunt lachrymae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt.
[Virg., *Æneid*, Lib. I, v. 466.]

EXPRESSION is generally the sign of some particular feeling. An actor who knows nothing about painting is a poor actor; a painter who is not a physiognomist is a poor painter. In every part of the world, each country, each district of that country, each town of that district, each family of that town, and each individual of that family has each moment his peculiar physiognomy and expression. A man may be either angry, or attentive, or curious; he loves, hates, scorns, disdains, admires; and each one of these states of feeling impresses itself in clear and unmistakable characters on his countenance.

[1] Used by permission of Beatrix L. Tollemache.

I say on his countenance, but it is shown in each feature, his mouth, his cheeks, his eyes; they light up, they grow dull, they languish, the look wanders or becomes staring. A painter's imagination is a storehouse of a vast number of impressions of this kind. Each of us has his own little collection, and thus forms his own judgment of beauty or ugliness. Pay attention, and ask yourself what it is which attracts or repels you when you look at a man or a woman, and you will find that it is always the signs of some good quality, or the marks of evil qualities in the expression of the face.

Imagine the statue of Antinöus before you. The features are regular and beautiful. The full cheeks show health; and we admire health, it is the corner-stone of happiness. The countenance is tranquil, and the feeling of repose pleases us. He looks wise and thoughtful; and we love wisdom and thoughtfulness. I will leave the rest of the figure and confine my remarks to the head.

Let the features remain as they are, but just lift up one corner of the mouth, and the expression will be ironical and less pleasing. Let the mouth return to its original state, and raise the eyebrows; it will give the effect of pride and be less pleasing. Now raise both corners of the mouth and let the eyes be wide open, and you will have a cynical face, and if you are a father you will not care to trust your daughter to that man. Let the corners of the mouth fall down, and drop the eyelids till they half conceal the pupils, and you will have made the face that of a deceitful, designing man, whom you will certainly avoid.

In society each class of citizens has its own character and expression, the artisan, the nobleman, the com-

moner, the man of letters, the ecclesiastic, the magistrate, the soldier.[1]

Amongst artisans also there are the bodily habits and the physiognomies produced by the shop and trade. Each society has its own form of government, and each form has its own salient quality, real or imagined, which is its spirit, its motive, and its support.

Equality is the dominating note of a republic; each subject considers himself a small king; therefore the expression of the republican is haughty, proud, severe.

In a monarchy there are two classes, those who command and those who obey; the character and expression produced are those of affability, grace, gentleness, honour, and gallantry.

Under a despotism we shall see on each countenance the influence of slavery, and we shall have gentle, timid faces, with a modest expression, deprecating and entreating. The slave walks with head bent; he seems always expecting the sword to fall on his neck.

Let us first of all draw a noble type of head. It is easier to paint the passions on a fine countenance. And the stronger the passions depicted the more terrible are they. The Eumenides of the old Greeks were beautiful, but were none the less awful. If we are at the same time greatly attracted and greatly repelled our emotion of fear will be increased; and this will be the effect produced by one of the Eumenides when she retains her grand and noble features.

[1] Mulready would dwell fondly on any traces left on the body by special habits; he would trace out the signs of previous occupations, and so amuse himself by drawing up a biography of his model. — Article on Mulready, by Lady Dilke. *Fortnightly Review*, September, 1892. — *Translator.*

For a man a long oval, broad in the upper part, narrowing below, produces a fine head.

For a woman and child the oval is rounder, which gives an expression of youth and grace.

A hair's-breadth difference in the drawing of a feature will make it more or less beautiful.

What we call grace is when the motion of the limbs is exactly suited to the action. Do not take the ideas of an actor or of a drawing-master on this subject.

Marcel's idea of grace is quite the contrary to that of the limbs in natural action. If Marcel met a man in the attitude of Antinöus he would put one hand under his chin and another on his shoulders. "Come now, you great booby," he would say, "is that the way to hold yourself?" Then pushing in his knees with his own and raising him up under the arms he would add, "One would think you were made of wax and were going to melt. Come, you fool, straighten this leg, display your figure, and don't drop your chin." And when he had made him look like a prim dandy he would begin to smile and be pleased with the effect of his own work.

If you cannot feel the difference in aspect between a man in society and a man full of eager action, between a man as he is alone or when he knows himself observed, you may throw your brushes into the fire.

You will academize, you will pose, you will stiffen all your figures.

Shall I explain this difference to you? You are sitting alone, waiting for my articles which have not yet come; you think that great people ought not to be kept waiting. You are lying back in your straw chair, your hands on your knees, your night-cap well over your forehead, and your hair straggling or turned back carelessly under

a comb; your dressing-gown is half open and falls down in long folds on each side, you look handsome and picturesque. But the door opens, the Marquis de Castries is announced, and you push back your night-cap, you fold your dressing-gown carefully together, and there you are, stiff, upright, with all your limbs in proper position, mannered *and marcelized* to please the visitor. The *artist* would be disgusted at the change; you were picturesque before — you are so no longer.

A Short Corollary from the Preceding Article

But what is the use of all these principles if taste is a capricious thing and if there is no eternal, unchangeable law of beauty?

If taste is merely a matter of caprice, if there is no law of beauty, whence come those delicious emotions which rise suddenly and involuntarily and tumultuously from the depths of our being, which loosen or tighten our heart-strings and force tears of joy, grief and admiration from our eyes at the sight of some grand physical phenomenon, or the hearing of some lofty moral trait of character? Begone, sophist, you will never persuade my heart that it did wrong to beat quicker, nor my emotions that they ought not to have been deeply stirred.

The true, the good, and the beautiful are very nearly connected. Add to either of the first two qualities some rare and striking circumstance and the true will be beautiful and the good will be beautiful.

If the solution of the problem of the movements of three bodies merely refers to three points on a scrap of paper, it is of no importance, it is a purely speculative truth. But if one of these bodies is the star that lights

us by day, and the second is the sphere that lights us by night, and the third is the globe we live in, the speculative truth immediately becomes sublime and beautiful.

One poet said of another poet: *He will not go far, he has not found the secret.* What secret? That of describing objects of real interest, fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children.

THE NOVEL

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

1850–1894

THIS essay was published as a preface to *Pierre et Jean* in 1887. Although Henry James one time observed that "in dissertation M. de Maupassant does not write with his best pen," this discussion of the novel is one of the few really lucid essays on the subject.

In making the translation which follows, the editor has preserved the original French paragraphing, although it is sometimes strikingly at variance with English and American standards.

I HAVE no intention of pleading here for the little novel which follows. Quite on the contrary, the ideas which I shall try to elucidate would entail the criticism, rather, of such a psychological study as I have undertaken in *Pierre et Jean*.

I wish to devote myself here to the Novel in general.

I am not the only one to whom the same reproach is addressed by the same critics, each time a new book appears.

In the midst of eulogistic sentences I find regularly this one, by the same pens: "The greatest fault in this work is that it is not a novel, properly speaking."

One could reply by the same argument: "The greatest fault in the writer who does me the honor to judge my work is that he is not a critic."

What are, in truth, the essential characteristics of the critic?

Without prejudice, without preconceived opinions, without the ideas of a school, without affiliations with

any special group of artists, he must understand, distinguish, and explain all tendencies the most opposite, temperaments the most contrary, and acknowledge artistic innovations of the most diverse character.

Now the critic who after *Manon Lescaut*, *Paul et Virginie*, *Don Quixote*, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, *Werther*, *Les Affinités Électives*, *Clarissa Harlowe*, *Émile*, *Candide*, *Cinq-Mars*, *René*, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, *Mauprat*, *Le Père Goriot*, *La Cousine Bette*, *Colomba*, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, *Notre Dame de Paris*, *Salammbô*, *Madame Bovary*, *Adolphe*, *M. de Camors*, *L'Assommoir*, *Sapho*, etc., dares still to write "This is a novel and that is not," seems to me to be endowed with a perspicacity which strongly resembles incompetence.

Ordinarily the critic understands by "novel" an adventure more or less probable, arranged in the fashion of a drama in three acts, of which the first contains the exposition, the second the action, and the third the dénouement.

This manner of composing is absolutely admissible on condition that one accept equally all the others.

Do rules exist for writing a novel, outside of which a written narrative ought to bear some other name?

If *Don Quixote* is a novel, is *Le Rouge et le Noir* another? If *Monte-Cristo* is a novel, is *L'Assommoir* one also? Can any comparison be established between *Les Affinités Électives* by Goethe, *Les Trois Mousquetaires* by Dumas, *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert, *M. de Camors* by O. Feuillet, and *Germinal* by Zola? Which of these works is a novel? What are the precious rules? Where do they come from? Who has established them? And in virtue of what principle, what authority, what reasoning?

It seems, nevertheless, that these critics know in some certain, indubitable fashion what constitutes a novel and what distinguishes it from something which is not one. This simply means that, without being producers, they enlist in a school, and that they reject, in the manner of novelists themselves, all the works conceived and executed outside of their own scheme of aesthetics.

An intelligent critic ought, on the contrary, to seek out everything that least resembles the novels already written, and to encourage young authors as much as possible to risk new paths.

All writers, Victor Hugo as well as M. Zola, have claimed with persistence the absolute, indisputable right of composing, that is to say imagining or observing, according to their personal conception of art. Talent springs from originality, which is a special manner of thinking, of seeing, of understanding, and of judging. Now the critic who presumes to define the novel according to the idea he has formed from the novels he likes, and to establish certain invariable rules of composition, will always war against the artistic temperament that introduces a new manner. A critic, if he is really to merit the name, should be only an analyst, without bias, without preferences, without passions; and, like a critic of pictures, should consider only the artistic value of the object of art submitted to him. His comprehension, open to every impression, ought to absorb his personality so completely that he can discover and praise the very books which he does not like as a man and must evaluate as a judge.

But most critics are, in truth, only readers, from which fact it results that they nearly always reprove us on false grounds, or compliment us without reserve and without measure.

The reader, who seeks in a book only to satisfy the natural tendency of his mind, asks the writer to satisfy his predominant taste, and he invariably characterizes as remarkable or as *well written* the work or the passage which pleases his imagination, be his imagination idealistic, gay, foul, sad, dreamy, or positive.

In brief, the public is composed of numerous groups who cry to us:

"Console me."
"Amuse me."
"Make me sad."
"Make me sympathetic."
"Make me dream."
"Make me laugh."
"Make me shudder."
"Make me weep."
"Make me think."

Some rare spirits alone request of the artist:

"Make me something beautiful, in the form which suits you best, according to your temperament."

The artist tries, succeeds or fails.

The critic ought to judge the result only according to the nature of the effort; and he has no right to preoccupy himself with tendencies.

This has been said a thousand times already. It will always be necessary to repeat it.

Then, after the literary schools which have sought to give us a vision of life deformed, superhuman, poetic, tender, charming, or superb, comes a realistic or naturalistic school which has professed to show us the truth, nothing but the truth, and all of the truth.

These different theories of art must be admitted with equal interest, and the works which they produce must

be judged solely from the point of view of their artistic merit, with the acceptance *a priori* of the general ideas which gave them birth.

To contest the right of an author to compose a poetic work or a realistic work is to wish to force him to modify his temperament, to challenge his originality, and to deny him the right to use the eye and the intelligence which nature has given him.

To reproach him for seeing the beautiful or the ugly, the small or the epic, the gracious or the sinister, is to reproach him for being formed in such or such fashion and for not having a vision that accords with ours.

Let us leave him free to comprehend, to observe, to conceive, as he pleases, provided he be an artist. Let us lift ourselves to poetic heights when we judge an idealist, and show him that his dream is mediocre, commonplace, not mad enough, not magnificent enough. But if we judge a naturalist, let us show him in what respects the truth in life differs from the truth in his book.

It is evident that schools so different must employ methods of composition which are absolutely opposite.

The novelist who transforms the constant, brutal, and disagreeable truth, in order to draw from it an exceptional and seducing adventure, ought, without exaggerated care for verisimilitude, to manipulate the events according to his taste, to prepare and arrange them to please the reader, to move him, or to touch his sympathy. The plan of his novel is only a series of ingenious combinations leading skillfully to the climax. The incidents are disposed and graduated toward the point of culmination and the final effect, which is a capital and decisive event, satisfying all the curiosity aroused at the beginning, putting up a barrier to interest, and terminat-

ing so completely the story told that one does not longer care to know what will happen to-morrow to the most interesting of the characters.

The novelist, however, who professes to give us an exact image of life ought to avoid carefully all linking of events that seems exceptional. His aim is not to tell a story, to amuse us, to touch us, but to force us to think, to understand the deep and hidden significance of events. Through his having seen and meditated, he sees the universe, things, facts, and men in a fashion that is peculiarly his own and that results from the total of his pondered observations. It is this personal vision of the world that he seeks to communicate to us by reproducing it in his book. In order to move us as he himself has been moved by the spectacle of life, he must reproduce it before our eyes with scrupulous similitude. He must, then, compose his work in a manner so skillful, so artful, and in appearance so simple, that it is impossible to perceive or to point out the plan, to discover his intentions.

Instead of devising an adventure and unfolding it in a manner suited to render it interesting to the end, he will take his character or characters at a certain period of their existence and conduct them, by natural transitions, to the period following. In this fashion he will show how minds are modified under the influence of surrounding circumstances; how the sentiments and the passions develop; how we love one another, how we hate one another, how we struggle in all social conditions; how the interests of the landlord, the interests of finance, the interests of family, the interests of politics, all struggle.

The acceptability of his plan will not consist, then, in emotion or in charm, in an attractive beginning or in a

moving catastrophe, but in the skillful grouping of little significant facts from which the definitive meaning of the work will stand forth. If he sets forth in three hundred pages ten years of a life to show what it has been, in the midst of all the beings which have surrounded it, and reveals its proper and characteristic signification, he should know how to eliminate among the innumerable little daily events all those which are inconsequential to him, and how to put in sharp light all those which would have remained unnoticed by observers less penetrating, and which give to the book its power, its total effect.

It is easy to see that such a method of composing, so different from the old, naïve procedure, often throws the critics off the track, and that they do not discover all the fine, secret, almost invisible threads employed by the modern artist in place of the single larger thread that was called the Plot.

In a word, if the novelist of yesterday selected and recounted the crises of life, the poignant states of the soul and the heart, the novelist of to-day writes the story of the heart, the soul, and the intelligence in their normal state. In order to produce the effect he strives for, that is, the emotion of simple reality, and to bring out the artistic point that he wishes to draw from it, that is, the revelation of that which is veritably the contemporary man before his eyes, he must employ only facts of an incontestable and unvarying truth.

But in taking the very point of view of these realists, one must discuss and contest their theory, which seems capable of being summed up in these words: "Nothing but the truth, and all of the truth."

Their intention being to disengage the philosophy of certain unvarying and current facts, they must often

revise the events to the profit of probability and to the detriment of truth, for

Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable.

The realist, if he is an artist, will seek, not to show us a commonplace photograph of life, but to give to us a more complete, more striking, more convincing view than the reality itself.

To tell everything would be impossible, for it would require at least a volume a day to record the multitudes of unimportant incidents that fill our lives.

Selection, therefore, is necessary — which is the first blow to the theory of "all the truth."

Life, moreover, is made up of things the most widely diversified, the most unforeseen, the most opposite, the most disparate; life is brutal, without sequence, without connection, full of inexplicable, illogical, and contradictory catastrophes which ought to be classed under the heading, *sundry facts*.

Here is the reason why the artist, having chosen his theme, will take from this life, encumbered with hazards and futilities, only the characteristic details useful to his subject; and he will reject all of the rest.

One example among a thousand:

The number of people who die by accident every day in this world is considerable. But can we make a tile fall on the head of the principal character, or throw him under the wheels of a carriage, in the middle of a story, under pretext that it is necessary to have an accident?

Life, moreover, leaves everything on the same scale; it precipitates facts or stretches them out indefinitely. Art, on the contrary, consists of using precautions and

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making preparations, of contriving artful and unobserved transitions, of putting in full light, by simple ingenuity of composition, the essential events, and of giving to all the others the degree of relief that belongs to them, according to their importance, in order to produce a profound impression of the special truth which one wishes to show.

To be truthful, then, consists of giving a complete illusion of truth, according to the ordinary logic of facts, and not in transcribing them servilely in the chaotic order of their occurrence.

So I reach the conclusion that the Realists of talent ought rather to call themselves the Illusionists.

What childishness, anyhow, to believe in reality when each one of us carries his own reality in his thought and his organs of perception! Our eyes, our ears, our sense of smell, our different tastes, create as many truths as there are men on the earth. And our minds which receive information from these sense-organs, being differently impressed, understand, analyze, and judge as if each one of us belonged to a different race.

Each of us, then, simply makes his own illusion of the world — illusion poetic, sentimental, joyous, melancholy, foul, or dismal — according to his nature. And the writer has no mission other than to reproduce faithfully this illusion, with all the processes of art that he has learned and can bring to bear.

Illusion of the beautiful, a human convention! Illusion of the ugly, a changing opinion! Illusion of the true, never unchanging! Illusion of the ignoble, attractive to so many! The great artists are those who impose upon humanity their particular illusion.

Let us not become angry, then, with any theory, since

each of them is simply the generalized expression of a temperament which analyzes itself.

There are two theories, above all, that have often been discussed, one set over against the other instead of both being admitted; namely, that of the purely analytical novel and that of the objective novel. The partisans of analysis demand that the writer shall endeavor to indicate the slightest evolutions of a soul and all the most secret motives which determine conduct, allowing to the action itself only a very secondary importance. *That* is the point arrived at, a simple limit, the pretext for the novel. It would be necessary, then, according to them, to write those precise and fanciful works in which imagination is confused with observation, after the manner of a philosopher composing a book on psychology, to set forth causes by following them to their most distant origins, to tell the why of every wish, and to discern all the reactions of the soul moving under the impulse of interests, of passions, or of instincts.

The partisans of objectivity (what a vile word!), pretending on the contrary to give us the exact representation of what takes place in life, carefully avoid every complicated explanation, every dissertation on motives, and limit themselves to causing to pass before our eyes the characters and the events.

For them, psychology ought to be hidden in the book as it is hidden in reality under the facts of existence.

The novel conceived in this manner gains thereby in interest, in narrative movement, in color, and in the bustle of life.

Thus, instead of explaining at length the state of mind of a character, the objective writers seek the action or the gesture to which this state of mind would

inevitably lead a man in a given situation. And they make him conduct himself in such a manner, from one end of the volume to the other, that all of his acts, all of his movements, are the reflection of his inmost nature, of all his thoughts, of all his resolves, or of all his hesitations. They hide their psychology, then, instead of displaying it; they make of it the frame of the work, as the invisible skeleton is the frame of the human body. The painter who makes our portrait does not show our skeleton.

It seems to me, moreover, that the novel executed in this fashion gains thereby in sincerity. It is, in the first place, more probable, for the people whom we see living around us do not relate to us the motives they obey.

In the next place, it must be remembered that if by observing men we can determine their nature accurately enough to foresee their mode of conduct in almost all circumstances — if we can say with precision: "Such a man, of such a temperament, in such a case, will do this" — it does not follow at all that we are able to determine, one by one, all the secret evolutions of his thought, which is not ours; all the mysterious solicitations of his instincts, which do not resemble ours; all the confused incitements of his nature, of which the organs, the nerves, the blood, the flesh, are different from ours.

Whatever be the genius of a feeble, gentle, passionless man, loving only knowledge and work, he will never be able to transport himself so completely into the soul and body of an exuberant, sensual, violent rascal, excited by every desire and even every vice, as to understand and set forth the inmost impulses and the sensations of this very different being, even though he can well foresee and recount all the acts of the other's life.

In brief, he who writes the pure psychology can only substitute himself for his characters in the different situations in which he places them, for it is impossible for him to change his organs, which are the sole intermediaries between the external life and us, which impose on us their perceptions, determine our sensibility, create in us a soul essentially different from all those around us. Our outlook, our knowledge of the world acquired by the aid of our senses, our ideas of life, cannot fail to be transferred in part to the characters whose most intimate and unknown self we profess to reveal. It is, then, always ourselves whom we exhibit in the body of a king, of an assassin, of a thief, of an honest man, of a courtesan, of a nun, of a young girl, or of a market-woman; for we are obliged to put the problem in this way: "If *I* were king, assassin, robber, courtesan, nun, young girl, or market-woman, what would *I* do, what would *I* think, how would *I* act?" We can, then, diversify the characters in our writing only by changing the age, the sex, the social situation and all the circumstances of the life of our *I*, which nature has surrounded with an insuperable barrier of organs.

Ingenuity consists in not letting the reader recognize this *I* under the different masks which serve to conceal it.

But if, from the sole point of view of complete exactitude, the purely psychological analysis is open to question, it can give us, nevertheless, some works of art as beautiful as all the other methods of working.

Here we have to-day the Symbolists. Why not? Their dream as artists is respectable; and they have this that is particularly interesting; namely, that they know and that they proclaim the extreme difficulty of art.

One must, in fact, be very mad, very audacious, very presumptuous, or very stupid to write nowadays. After so many masters of such varied natures, of such manifold genius, what remains to be done that has not been done, what remains to be said that has not been said? Who among us can boast that he has written one page, one sentence, that might not have been found, almost identically, somewhere? When we read, we, so saturated with French writings that our entire body gives the impression of being made up of words, do we ever find a line, a thought, which is not familiar to us, or of which we have not had at least the confused presentiment?

The man who seeks only to amuse his public by means already known, writes with confidence, in the candor of his mediocrity, some works destined to the ignorant, unoccupied crowd. But those on whom all the centuries of past literature weigh heavily, those whom nothing satisfies, who are disgusted with everything because they dream of something better, to whom the flowers seem already gathered, to whom their own work gives always the impression of useless and common labor — these come to judge literary art as something evasive, mysterious, which a number of pages of the greatest masters scarcely reveal to us.

Twenty lines of verse, twenty sentences of prose, read suddenly, thrill us to the heart as a surprising revelation; but the lines that follow seem like all other verse, and the prose which comes next seems like all other prose.

Men of genius, without doubt, do not have these tribulations and torments, because such men bear in themselves an irresistible creative force. They do not offer judgment on themselves. Others, however — we others

who are simply conscientious and persistent workers — can struggle against invincible discouragement only by continuity of effort.

Two men, by their simple and luminous teachings, have given me this power of holding on persistently: Louis Bouilhet and Gustave Flaubert.

If I speak here of them and myself, it is because their counsel, summed up in a few lines, will perhaps be useful to some young persons less confident in themselves than one ordinarily is when one enters the field of letters.

Bouilhet, whom I first knew rather intimately, about two years before I gained the friendship of Flaubert, by constantly repeating to me that a hundred lines of verse, perhaps less, are sufficient to make the reputation of an artist, if they are irreproachable and if they embody the essence of the talent and the originality of a man of even the second order, made me understand that constant labor and a thorough knowledge of one's craft can, on some day of lucidity, of power, and of enthusiasm, by our happy meeting with a subject fully in harmony with all the tendencies of our spirit, quicken into life a short work, unique and as perfect as we can make it.

I came to see, in the next place, that the best known writers have almost never left more than one volume, and that it is necessary, before all else, to have this opportunity to find and to discern, in the midst of the multitude of matters that present themselves to our choice, that which will absorb all of our faculties, all of our courage, all of our artistic power.

Later, Flaubert, whom I saw occasionally, took a liking to me. I dared to submit to him some of my efforts. He read them with kindness and replied to me: "I do

not know whether you have talent. What you have brought to me reveals a certain intelligence; but do not forget this, young man, that talent — in the words of Buffon — is only long patience. Work on."

I worked on, and I often went back to see him, since I observed that he liked me, for he was accustomed to refer to me, laughingly, as his disciple.

During seven years I wrote verse, I wrote short stories, I wrote novelettes, I even wrote a detestable drama. Nothing remains of these. The master read all; then on the Sunday following, at lunch, he would develop his criticism and drive in, little by little, two or three principles that are the sum of his long and patient teachings. "If one has an originality," he said, "the first thing necessary is to develop it; if one has none, it is necessary to acquire one."

— Talent is long patience. When one has something to express, he must look at it so long and with such close attention that he discovers in it some aspect that has not been seen and expressed by anyone else. In everything there is something of the unexplored, because we are accustomed to use our eyes only in connection with our memory of what has been thought before us on the subject we contemplate. The least object contains a little of the unknown. Let us find it. In order to describe a fire that flames and a tree on the plain, let us stay in the presence of that fire and that tree until they have ceased to resemble, for us, any other tree or any other fire.

It is in this manner that one becomes original.

Having, moreover, posited this truth that there are not, in the whole world, two grains of sand, two flies, two hands, or two noses absolutely alike, he required

me to describe, in a few sentences, a being or an object in such a way as to particularize it sharply, to distinguish it from all the other beings or all the other objects of the same species or the same class.

"When you pass," he used to say to me, "before a grocer seated at his door, before a janitor who smokes his pipe, before a stand of coaches, show me this grocer and this janitor, their pose, their whole physical appearance, including also — indicated by the ingenuity of the picture — their whole moral nature, in such fashion that I cannot confuse them with any other grocer, or any other janitor; and make me see, by a single word in what respect one coach horse differs in appearance from fifty others that follow him or precede him."

I have explained elsewhere his ideas on style. They are in accord with the theory of observation that I have just set forth.

Whatever be the thing one wishes to say, there is only one word to express it, only one verb to animate it, only one adjective to qualify it. It is necessary, then, to search till one has discovered that word, that verb, that adjective, and never to be content with almost finding it, never to have recourse to trickery, never to resort to the buffooneries of language in order to avoid the difficulty.

One can interpret and characterize the subtlest things by bearing in mind the line of Boileau:

> D'un mot mis en sa place enseigna le pouvoir.

There is no need of the bizarre, complicated, crowded, and Chinese-like vocabulary imposed upon us to-day under the name of artistic writing, in order to express all shades of thought; but it is necessary to discern with

extreme clearness all the modifications of the value of a word according to the place it occupies. Let us have fewer nouns, verbs, and adjectives with almost imperceptible meanings, and greater variety of sentences, diversely constructed, ingeniously divided, full of sonorousness and skillful rhythms. Let us make ourselves excellent stylists rather than collectors of rare terms.

It is, in truth, more difficult to manage the sentence at will, to make it say everything, even that which it does not declare openly, to fill it with hidden meanings, with secret and unformulated suggestions, than to invent new expressions or to search out, in the depths of old, unknown books, all those which have lost their usage and their signification, and which are for us as dead verbs.

The French language, moreover, is a pure stream which the manneristic writers have never been able, and never shall be able, to disturb. Each century has thrown into this limpid current its particular fashions, its pretentious archaisms and its preciosities, without leaving afloat any of these useless attempts, any of these impotent efforts. The nature of this language is to be clear, logical, and vigorous. It will not permit itself to be enfeebled, obscured, or corrupted.

Those who to-day write their descriptions without guarding against abstract terms, those who have the hail or the rain fall on the *cleanness* of the window-panes, can also throw some stones at the simplicity of their colleagues. These stones may hit the colleagues, who have a body, but they will never reach the simplicity, which has none.

THE ART OF FICTION[1]

HENRY JAMES

1843–1919

"The Art of Fiction" was published in *Longman's Magazine* in 1884 and was reprinted in *Partial Portraits* (The Macmillan Company) in 1888. The title of the essay was taken from a paper that Walter Besant had written and that evoked Henry James's discussion of the novel. Stevenson in his "A Humble Remonstrance" discusses both of the essays. There he characterizes Henry James as "so precise of outline, so cunning of fence, so scrupulous of finish."

The introductory pages of the essay, in which the issue with Walter Besant is presented, are here omitted.

A NOVEL is in its broadest definition a personal, a direct impression of life: that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. The tracing of a line to be followed, of a tone to be taken, of a form to be filled out, is a limitation of that freedom and suppression of the very thing that we are most curious about. The form, it seems to me, is to be appreciated after the fact: then the author's choice has been made, his standard has been indicated; then we can follow lines and directions and compare tones and resemblances. Then in a word we can enjoy one of the most charming of pleasures, we can estimate quality, we can apply the test of execution. The execution belongs to the author alone; it is what is

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most personal to him, and we measure him by that. The advantage, the luxury, as well as the torment and responsibility of the novelist, is that there is no limit to what he may attempt as an executant — no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes. Here it is especially that he works, step by step, like his brother of the brush, of whom we may always say that he has painted his picture in a manner best known to himself. His manner is his secret, not necessarily a jealous one. He cannot disclose it as a general thing if he would; he would be at a loss to teach it to others. I say this with a due recollection of having insisted on the community of method of the artist who paints a picture and the artist who writes a novel. The painter *is* able to teach the rudiments of his practice, and it is possible, from the study of good work (granted the aptitude), both to learn how to paint and to learn how to write. Yet it remains true, without injury to the *rapprochement*, that the literary artist would be obliged to say to his pupil much more than the other, "Ah, well, you must do it as you can!" It is a question of degree, a matter of delicacy. If there are exact sciences, there are also exact arts, and the grammar of painting is so much more definite that it makes the difference.

I ought to add, however, that if Mr. Besant says at the beginning of his essay that the "laws of fiction may be laid down and taught with as much precision and exactness as the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion," he mitigates what might appear to be an extravagance by applying his remark to "general" laws, and by expressing most of these rules in a manner with which it would certainly be unaccommodating to disagree. That the novelist must write from his experience,

that his "characters must be real and such as might be met with in actual life"; that "a young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life," and "a writer whose friends and personal experiences belong to the lower middle-class should carefully avoid introducing his characters into society"; that one should enter one's notes in a commonplace book; that one's figures should be clear in outline; that making them clear by some trick of speech or of carriage is a bad method, and "describing them at length" is a worse one; that English Fiction should have a "conscious moral purpose"; that "it is almost impossible to estimate too highly the value of careful workmanship — that is, of style"; that "the most important point of all is the story," that "the story is everything": these are principles with most of which it is surely impossible not to sympathize. That remark about the lower middle-class writer and his knowing his place is perhaps rather chilling; but for the rest I should find it difficult to dissent from any one of these recommendations. At the same time, I should find it difficult positively to assent to them, with the exception, perhaps, of the injunction as to entering one's notes in a commonplace book. They scarcely seem to me to have the quality that Mr. Besant attributes to the rules of the novelist — the "precision and exactness" of "the laws of harmony, perspective, and proportion." They are suggestive, they are even inspiring, but they are not exact, though they are doubtless as much so as the case admits of: which is a proof of that liberty of interpretation for which I just contended. For the value of these different injunctions — so beautiful and so vague — is wholly in the meaning one attaches to them. The characters,

the situation, which strike one as real will be those that touch and interest one most, but the measure of reality is very difficult to fix. The reality of Don Quixote or of Mr. Micawber is a very delicate shade; it is a reality so coloured by the author's vision that, vivid as it may be, one would hesitate to propose it as a model: one would expose one's self to some very embarrassing questions on the part of a pupil. It goes without saying that you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality; but it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being. Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not; as for telling you in advance how your nosegay should be composed, that is another affair. It is equally excellent and inconclusive to say that one must write from experience; to our supposititious aspirant such a declaration might savour of mockery. What kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative — much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius — it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. The young lady living in a village has only to be a damsel upon whom nothing is lost to make it quite unfair (as it seems to me) to declare to her that she shall have nothing to say about the military. Greater miracles have been seen than that, imagination assisting, she should speak the truth about some

of these gentlemen. I remember an English novelist, a woman of genius, telling me that she was much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth. She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a *pasteur*, some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. She had got her direct personal impression, and she turned out her type. She knew what youth was, and what Protestantism; she also had the advantage of having seen what it was to be French, so that she converted these ideas into a concrete image and produced a reality. Above all, however, she was blessed with the faculty which when you give it an inch takes an ell, and which for the artist is a much greater source of strength than any accident of residence or of place in the social scale. The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it — this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town, and in the most differing stages of education. If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe. Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, "Write from experience and experience

only," I should feel that this was rather a tantalizing monition if I were not careful immediately to add, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"

I am far from intending by this to minimize the importance of exactness — of truth of detail. One can speak best from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel — the merit on which all its other merits (including that conscious moral purpose of which Mr. Besant speaks) helplessly and submissively depend. If it be not there they are all as nothing, and if these be there, they owe their effect to the success with which the author has produced the illusion of life. The cultivation of this success, the study of this exquisite process, form, to my taste, the beginning and the end of the art of the novelist. They are his inspiration, his despair, his reward, his torment, his delight. It is here in very truth that he competes with life; it is here that he competes with his brother the painter in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle. It is in regard to this that Mr. Besant is well inspired when he bids him take notes. He cannot possibly take too many, he cannot possibly take enough. All life solicits him, and to "render" the simplest surface, to produce the most momentary illusion, is a very complicated business. His case would be easier, and the rule would be more exact, if Mr. Besant had been able to tell him what notes to take. But this, I fear, he can never learn in any manual; it is the business of his life. He has to take a great many in order to select a few, he has to work them up as he can, and even the

guides and philosophers who might have most to say to him must leave him alone when it comes to the application of precepts, as we leave the painter in communion with his palette. That his characters "must be clear in outline," as Mr. Besant says — he feels that down to his boots; but how he shall make them so is a secret between his good angel and himself. It would be absurdly simple if he could be taught that a great deal of "description" would make them so, or that on the contrary the absence of description and the cultivation of dialogue, or the absence of dialogue and the multiplication of "incident," would rescue him from his difficulties. Nothing, for instance, is more possible than that he be of a turn of mind for which this odd, literal opposition of description and dialogue, incident and description, has little meaning and light. People often talk of these things as if they had a kind of internecine distinctness, instead of melting into each other at every breath, and being intimately associated parts of one general effort of expression. I cannot imagine composition existing in a series of blocks, nor conceive, in any novel worth discussing at all, of a passage of description that is not in its intention narrative, a passage of dialogue that is not in its intention descriptive, a touch of truth of any sort that does not partake of the nature of incident, or an incident that derives its interest from any other source than the general and only source of the success of a work of art — that of being illustrative. A novel is a living thing, all one and continuous, like any other organism, and in proportion as it lives will it be found, I think, that in each of the parts there is something of each of the other parts. The critic who over the close texture of a finished work shall pretend to trace a geography of items will mark some

frontiers as artificial, I fear, as any that have been known to history. There is an old-fashioned distinction between the novel of character and the novel of incident which must have cost many a smile to the intending fabulist who was keen about his work. It appears to me as little to the point as the equally celebrated distinction between the novel and the romance — to answer as little to any reality. There are bad novels and good novels, as there are bad pictures and good pictures; but that is the only distinction in which I see any meaning, and I can as little imagine speaking of a novel of character as I can imagine speaking of a picture of character. When one says picture one says of character, when one says novel one says of incident, and the terms may be transposed at will. What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character? What is either a picture or a novel that is *not* of character? What else do we seek in it and find in it? It is an incident for a woman to stand up with her hand resting on a table and look out at you in a certain way; or if it be not an incident I think it will be hard to say what it is. At the same time it is an expression of character. If you say you don't see it (character in *that — allons donc!*), this is exactly what the artist who has reasons of his own for thinking he *does* see it undertakes to show you. When a young man makes up his mind that he has not faith enough after all to enter the church as he intended, that is an incident, though you may not hurry to the end of the chapter to see whether perhaps he doesn't change once more. I do not say that these are extraordinary or startling incidents. I do not pretend to estimate the degree of interest proceeding from them, for this will depend upon the skill of the painter. It sounds almost

puerile to say that some incidents are intrinsically much more important than others, and I need not take this precaution after having professed my sympathy for the major ones in remarking that the only classification of the novel that I can understand is into that which has life and that which has it not.

The novel and the romance, the novel of incident and that of character — these clumsy separations appear to me to have been made by critics and readers for their own convenience, and to help them out of some of their occasional queer predicaments, but to have little reality or interest for the producer, from whose point of view it is of course that we are attempting to consider the art of fiction. The case is the same with another shadowy category which Mr. Besant apparently is disposed to set up — that of the "modern English novel"; unless indeed it be that in this matter he has fallen into an accidental confusion of standpoints. It is not quite clear whether he intends the remarks in which he alludes to it to be didactic or historical. It is as difficult to suppose a person intending to write a modern English as to suppose him writing an ancient English novel: that is a label which begs the question. One writes the novel, one paints the picture, of one's language and of one's time, and calling it modern English will not, alas! make the difficult task any easier. No more, unfortunately, will calling this or that work of one's fellow-artist a romance — unless it be, of course, simply for the pleasantness of the thing, as for instance when Hawthorne gave this heading to his story of *Blithedale*. The French, who have brought the theory of fiction to remarkable completeness, have but one name for the novel, and have not attempted smaller things in it, that I can see, for

that. I can think of no obligation to which the "romancer" would not be held equally with the novelist; the standard of execution is equally high for each. Of course it is of execution that we are talking — that being the only point of a novel that is open to contention. This is perhaps too often lost sight of, only to produce interminable confusions and cross-purposes. We must grant the artist his subject, his idea, his *donnée:* our criticism is applied only to what he makes of it. Naturally I do not mean that we are bound to like it or find it interesting: in case we do not, our course is perfectly simple— to let it alone. We may believe that of a certain idea even the most sincere novelist can make nothing at all, and the event may perfectly justify our belief; but the failure will have been a failure to execute, and it is in the execution that the fatal weakness is recorded. If we pretend to respect the artist at all, we must allow him his freedom of choice, in the face, in particular cases, of innumerable presumptions that the choice will not fructify. Art derives a considerable part of its beneficial exercise from flying in the face of presumptions, and some of the most interesting experiments of which it is capable are hidden in the bosom of common things. Gustave Flaubert has written a story about the devotion of a servant-girl to a parrot, and the production, highly finished as it is, cannot on the whole be called a success. We are perfectly free to find it flat, but I think it might have been interesting; and I, for my part, am extremely glad he should have written it; it is a contribution to our knowledge of what can be done — or what cannot. Ivan Turgénieff has written a tale about a deaf and dumb serf and a lap-dog, and the thing is touching, loving, a little masterpiece. He struck the note of life

where Gustave Flaubert missed it — he flew in the face of a presumption and achieved a victory.

Nothing, of course, will ever take the place of the good old fashion of "liking" a work of art or not liking it: the most improved criticism will not abolish that primitive, that ultimate test. I mention this to guard myself from the accusation of intimating that the idea, the subject, of a novel or a picture, does not matter. It matters, to my sense, in the highest degree, and if I might put up a prayer it would be that artists should select none but the richest. Some, as I have already hastened to admit, are much more remunerative than others, and it would be a world happily arranged in which persons intending to treat them should be exempt from confusions and mistakes. This fortunate condition will arrive only, I fear, on the same day that critics become purged from error. Meanwhile, I repeat, we do not judge the artist with fairness unless we say to him, "Oh, I grant you your starting-point, because if I did not I should seem to prescribe to you, and heaven forbid I should take that responsibility. If I pretend to tell you what you must not take, you will call upon me to tell you then what you must take; in which case I shall be prettily caught. Moreover, it isn't till I have accepted your data that I can begin to measure you. I have the standard, the pitch; I have no right to tamper with your flute and then criticise your music. Of course I may not care for your idea at all; I may think it silly, or stale, or unclean; in which case I wash my hands of you altogether. I may content myself with believing that you will not have succeeded in being interesting, but I shall, of course, not attempt to demonstrate it, and you will be as indifferent to me as I am to you. I needn't remind

you that there are all sorts of tastes: who can know it better? Some people, for excellent reasons, don't like to read about carpenters; others, for reasons even better, don't like to read about courtesans. Many object to Americans. Others (I believe they are mainly editors and publishers) won't look at Italians. Some readers don't like quiet subjects; others don't like bustling ones. Some enjoy a complete illusion, others the consciousness of large concessions. They choose their novels accordingly, and if they don't care about your idea they won't, *a fortiori*, care about your treatment."

So that it comes back very quickly, as I have said, to the liking: in spite of M. Zola, who reasons less powerfully than he represents, and who will not reconcile himself to this absoluteness of taste, thinking that there are certain things that people ought to like, and that they can be made to like. I am quite at a loss to imagine anything (at any rate in this matter of fiction) that people *ought* to like or to dislike. Selection will be sure to take care of itself, for it has a constant motive behind it. That motive is simply experience. As people feel life, so they will feel the art that is most closely related to it. This closeness of relation is what we should never forget in talking of the effort of the novel. Many people speak of it as a factitious, artificial form, a product of ingenuity, the business of which is to alter and arrange the things that surround us, to translate them into conventional, traditional moulds. This, however, is a view of the matter which carries us but a very short way, condemns the art to an eternal repetition of a few familiar *clichés*, cuts short its development, and leads us straight up to a dead wall. Catching the very note and trick, the strange irregular rhythm of life, that is the at-

tempt whose strenuous force keeps Fiction upon her feet. In proportion as in what she offers us we see life *without* rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it *with* rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention. It is not uncommon to hear an extraordinary assurance of remark in regard to this matter of rearranging, which is often spoken of as if it were the last word of art. Mr. Besant seems to me in danger of falling into the great error with his rather unguarded talk about "selection." Art is essentially selection, but it is a selection whose main care is to be typical, to be inclusive. For many people art means rose-coloured window-panes, and selection means picking a bouquet for Mrs. Grundy. They will tell you glibly that artistic considerations have nothing to do with the disagreeable, with the ugly; they will rattle off shallow commonplaces about the province of art and the limits of art till you are moved to some wonder in return as to the province and the limits of ignorance. It appears to me that no one can ever have made a seriously artistic attempt without becoming conscious of an immense increase — a kind of revelation — of freedom. One perceives in that case — by the light of a heavenly ray — that the province of art is all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision. As Mr. Besant so justly intimates, it is all experience. That is a sufficient answer to those who maintain that it must not touch the sad things of life, who stick into its divine unconscious bosom little prohibitory inscriptions on the end of sticks, such as we see in public gardens — "It is forbidden to walk on the grass; it is forbidden to touch the flowers; it is not allowed to introduce dogs or to remain after

dark; it is requested to keep to the right." The young aspirant in the line of fiction whom we continue to imagine will do nothing without taste, for in that case his freedom would be of little use to him; but the first advantage of his taste will be to reveal to him the absurdity of the little sticks and tickets. If he have taste, I must add, of course he will have ingenuity, and my disrespectful reference to that quality just now was not meant to imply that it is useless in fiction. But it is only a secondary aid; the first is a capacity for receiving straight impressions.

Mr. Besant has some remarks on the question of "the story" which I shall not attempt to criticise, though they seem to me to contain a singular ambiguity, because I do not think I understand them. I cannot see what is meant by talking as if there were a part of a novel which is the story and part of it which for mystical reasons is not — unless indeed the distinction be made in a sense in which it is difficult to suppose that any one should attempt to convey anything. "The story," if it represents anything, represents the subject, the idea, the *donnée* of the novel; and there is surely no "school" — Mr. Besant speaks of a school — which urges that a novel should be all treatment and no subject. There must assuredly be something to treat; every school is intimately conscious of that. This sense of the story being the idea, the starting-point, of the novel, is the only one that I see in which it can be spoken of as something different from its organic whole; and since in proportion as the work is successful the idea permeates and penetrates it, informs and animates it, so that every word and every punctuation-point contribute directly to the expression, in that proportion do we lose our

sense of the story being a blade which may be drawn more or less out of its sheath. The story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread. Mr. Besant is not the only critic who may be observed to have spoken as if there were certain things in life which constitute stories, and certain others which do not. I find the same odd implication in an entertaining article in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, devoted, as it happens, to Mr. Besant's lecture. "The story is the thing!" says this graceful writer, as if with a tone of opposition to some other idea. I should think it was, as every painter who, as the time for "sending in" his picture looms in the distance, finds himself still in quest of a subject — as every belated artist not fixed about his theme will heartily agree. There are some subjects which speak to us and others which do not, but he would be a clever man who should undertake to give a rule — an index expurgatorius — by which the story and the no-story should be known apart. It is impossible (to me at least) to imagine any such rule which shall not be altogether arbitrary. The writer in the *Pall Mall* opposes the delightful (as I suppose) novel of *Margot la Balafrée* to certain tales in which "Bostonian nymphs" appear to have "rejected English dukes for psychological reasons." I am not acquainted with the romance just designated, and can scarcely forgive the *Pall Mall* critic for not mentioning the name of the author, but the title appears to refer to a lady who may have received a scar in some heroic adventure. I am inconsolable at not being acquainted with this episode, but am utterly at a loss to see why it is a story when the rejection (or accept-

ance) of a duke is not, and why a reason, psychological or other, is not a subject when a cicatrix is. They are all particles of the multitudinous life with which the novel deals, and surely no dogma which pretends to make it lawful to touch the one and unlawful to touch the other will stand for a moment on its feet. It is the special picture that must stand or fall, according as it seem to possess truth or to lack it. Mr. Besant does not, to my sense, light up the subject by intimating that a story must, under penalty of not being a story, consist of "adventures." Why of adventures more than of green spectacles? He mentions a category of impossible things, and among them he places "fiction without adventure." Why without adventure, more than without matrimony, or celibacy, or parturition, or cholera, or hydropathy, or Jansenism? This seems to me to bring the novel back to the hapless little *rôle* of being an artificial, ingenious thing — bring it down from its large, free character of an immense and exquisite correspondence with life. And what *is* adventure, when it comes to that, and by what sign is the listening pupil to recognize it? It is an adventure — an immense one — for me to write this little article; and for a Bostonian nymph to reject an English duke is an adventure only less stirring, I should say, than for an English duke to be rejected by a Bostonian nymph. I see dramas within dramas in that, and innumerable points of view. A psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial; to catch the tint of its complexion — I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque efforts. There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a psychological reason, and yet, I protest, the novel seems to me the most magnificent form of art. I have just been

reading, at the same time, the delightful story of *Treasure Island*, by Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson and, in a manner less consecutive, the last tale from M. Edmond de Goncourt, which is entitled *Chérie*. One of these works treats of murders, mysteries, islands of dreadful renown, hairbreadth escapes, miraculous coincidences and buried doubloons. The other treats of a little French girl who lived in a fine house in Paris, and died of wounded sensibility because no one would marry her. I call *Treasure Island* delightful, because it appears to me to have succeeded wonderfully in what it attempts; and I venture to bestow no epithet upon *Chérie*, which strikes me as having failed deplorably in what it attempts — that is in tracing the development of the moral consciousness of a child. But one of these productions strikes me as exactly as much of a novel as the other, and as having a "story" quite as much. The moral consciousness of a child is as much a part of life as the islands of the Spanish Main, and the one sort of geography seems to me to have those "surprises" of which Mr. Besant speaks quite as much as the other. For myself (since it comes back in the last resort, as I say, to the preference of the individual), the picture of the child's experience has the advantage that I can at successive steps (an immense luxury, near to the "sensual pleasure" of which Mr. Besant's critic in the *Pall Mall* speaks) say Yes or No, as it may be, to what the artist puts before me. I have seen a child in fact, but I have been on a quest for a buried treasure only in supposition, and it is a simple accident that with M. de Goncourt I should have for the most part to say No. With George Eliot, when she painted that country with a far other intelligence, I always said Yes.

The most interesting part of Mr. Besant's lecture is unfortunately the briefest passage — his very cursory allusion to the "conscious moral purpose" of the novel. Here again it is not very clear whether he be recording a fact or laying down a principle; it is a great pity that in the latter case he should not have developed his idea. This branch of the subject is of immense importance, and Mr. Besant's few words point to considerations of the widest reach, not to be lightly disposed of. He will have treated the art of fiction but superficially who is not prepared to go every inch of the way that these considerations will carry him. It is for this reason that at the beginning of these remarks I was careful to notifiy the reader that my reflections on so large a theme have no pretension to be exhaustive. Like Mr. Besant, I have left the question of the morality of the novel till the last, and at the last I find I have used up my space. It is a question surrounded with difficulties, as witness the very first that meets us, in the form of a definite question, on the threshold. Vagueness, in such a discussion, is fatal, and what is the meaning of your morality and your conscious moral purpose? Will you not define your terms and explain how (a novel being a picture) a picture can be either moral or immoral? You wish to paint a moral picture or carve a moral statue: will you not tell us how you would set about it? We are discussing the Art of Fiction; questions of art are questions (in the widest sense) of execution; questions of morality are quite another affair, and will you not let us see how it is that you find it so easy to mix them up? These things are so clear to Mr. Besant that he has deduced from them a law which he sees embodied in English Fiction, and which is "a truly admirable thing and a great cause

for congratulation." It is a great cause for congratulation indeed when such thorny problems become as smooth as silk. I may add that in so far as Mr. Besant perceives that in point of fact English Fiction has addressed itself preponderantly to these delicate questions he will appear to many people to have made a vain discovery. They will have been positively struck, on the contrary, with the moral timidity of the usual English novelist; with his (or with her) aversion to face the difficulties with which on every side the treatment of reality bristles. He is apt to be extremely shy (whereas the picture that Mr. Besant draws is a picture of boldness), and the sign of his work, for the most part, is a cautious silence on certain subjects. In the English novel (by which of course I mean the American as well), more than in any other, there is a traditional difference between that which people know and that which they agree to admit that they know, that which they see and that which they speak of, that which they feel to be a part of life and that which they allow to enter into literature. There is the great difference, in short, between what they talk of in conversation and what they talk of in print. The essence of moral energy is to survey the whole field, and I should directly reverse Mr. Besant's remark and say not that the English novel has a purpose, but that it has a diffidence. To what degree a purpose in a work of art is a source of corruption I shall not attempt to inquire; the one that seems to me least dangerous is the purpose of making a perfect work. As for our novel, I may say lastly on this score that as we find it in England to-day it strikes me as addressed in a large degree to "young people," and that this in itself constitutes a presumption that it will be rather shy. There

are certain things which it is generally agreed not to discuss, not even to mention, before young people. That is very well, but the absence of discussion is not a symptom of the moral passion. The purpose of the English novel — "a truly admirable thing, and a great cause for congratulation" — strikes me therefore as rather negative.

There is one point at which the moral sense and the artistic sense lie very near together; that is in the light of the very obvious truth that the deepest quality of a work of art will always be the quality of the mind of the producer. In proportion as that intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth. To be constituted of such elements is, to my vision, to have purpose enough. No good novel will ever proceed from a superficial mind; that seems to me an axiom which, for the artist in fiction, will cover all needful moral ground: if the youthful aspirant take it to heart it will illuminate for him many of the mysteries of "purpose." There are many other useful things that might be said to him, but I have come to the end of my article, and can only touch them as I pass. The critic in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, whom I have already quoted, draws attention to the danger, in speaking of the art of fiction, of generalizing. The danger that he has in mind is rather, I imagine, that of particularizing, for there are some comprehensive remarks which, in addition to those embodied in Mr. Besant's suggestive lecture, might without fear of misleading him be addressed to the ingenuous student. I should remind him first of the magnificence of the form that is open to him, which offers to sight so few restrictions and such innumerable opportunities. The other arts, in comparison, appear con-

fined and hampered; the various conditions under which they are exercised are so rigid and definite. But the only condition that I can think of attaching to the composition of the novel is, as I have already said, that it be sincere. This freedom is a splendid privilege, and the first lesson of the young novelist is to learn to be worthy of it. "Enjoy it as it deserves," I should say to him; "take possession of it, explore it to its utmost extent, publish it, rejoice in it. All life belongs to you, and do not listen either to those who would shut you up into corners of it and tell you that it is only here and there that art inhabits, or to those who would persuade you that this heavenly messenger wings her way outside of life altogether, breathing a superfine air, and turning away her head from the truth of things. There is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place; you have only to remember that talents so dissimilar as those of Alexandre Dumas and Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert have worked in this field with equal glory. Do not think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the colour of life itself. In France to-day we see a prodigious effort (that of Emile Zola, to whose solid and serious work no explorer of the capacity of the novel can allude without respect), we see an extraordinary effort vitiated by a spirit of pessimism on a narrow basis. M. Zola is magnificent, but he strikes an English reader as ignorant; he has an air of working in the dark; if he had as much light as energy, his results would be of the highest value. As for the aberrations of a shallow optimism, the ground (of English fiction especially) is strewn with their brittle particles as with broken glass. If you must indulge

in conclusions, let them have the taste of a wide knowledge. Remember that your first duty is to be as complete as possible — to make as perfect a work. Be generous and delicate and pursue the prize."

A HUMBLE REMONSTRANCE[1]

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

1850–1894

This essay is self-explanatory when read in connection with Henry James's "The Art of Fiction."

WE have recently[2] enjoyed a quite peculiar pleasure; hearing, in some detail, the opinions, about the art they practise, of Mr. Walter Besant and Mr. Henry James; two men certainly of very different calibre: Mr. James so precise of outline, so cunning of fence, so scrupulous of finish, and Mr. Besant so genial, so friendly, with so persuasive and humourous a vein of whim: Mr. James the very type of the deliberate artist, Mr. Besant the impersonation of good-nature. That such doctors should differ will excite no great surprise; but one point in which they seem to agree fills me, I confess, with wonder. For they are both content to talk about the "art of fiction"; and Mr. Besant, waxing exceedingly bold, goes on to oppose this so-called "art of fiction" to the "art of poetry." By the art of poetry he can mean nothing but the art of verse, an art of handicraft, and only comparable with the art of prose. For that heat and height of sane emotion which we agree to call by the name of poetry, is but a libertine and vagrant quality; present, at times, in any art, more often absent from them all; too seldom present in the prose novel, too frequently absent from the ode and epic. Fiction is in the same case; it is no substantive art, but

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[2] 1884.

an element which enters largely into all the arts but architecture. Homer, Wordsworth, Phidias, Hogarth, and Salvini, all deal in fiction; and yet I do not suppose that either Hogarth or Salvini, to mention but these two, entered in any degree into the scope of Mr. Besant's interesting lecture or Mr. James's charming essay. The art of fiction, then, regarded as a definition, is both too ample and too scanty. Let me suggest another; let me suggest that what both Mr. James and Mr. Besant had in view was neither more nor less than the art of narrative.

But Mr. Besant is anxious to speak solely of "the modern English novel," the stay and breadwinner of Mr. Mudie; and in the author of the most pleasing novel on that roll, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, the desire is natural enough. I can conceive, then, that he would hasten to propose two additions, and read thus: the art of *fictitious* narrative *in prose*.

Now the fact of the existence of the modern English novel is not to be denied; materially, with its three volumes, leaded type, and gilded lettering, it is easily distinguishable from other forms of literature; but to talk at all fruitfully of any branch of art, it is needful to build our definitions on some more fundamental ground than binding. Why, then, are we to add "in prose"? *The Odyssey* appears to me the best of romances; *The Lady of the Lake* to stand high in the second order; and Chaucer's tales and prologues to contain more of the matter and art of the modern English novel than the whole treasury of Mr. Mudie. Whether a narrative be written in blank verse or the Spenserian stanza, in the long period of Gibbon or the chipped phrase of Charles Reade, the principles of the art of narrative must be equally ob-

served. The choice of a noble and swelling style in prose affects the problem of narration in the same way, if not to the same degree, as the choice of measured verse; for both imply a closer synthesis of events, a higher key of dialogue, and a more picked and stately strain of words. If you are to refuse *Don Juan*, it is hard to see why you should include *Zanoni* or (to bracket works of very different value) *The Scarlet Letter;* and by what discrimination are you to open your doors to *The Pilgrim's Progress* and close them on *The Faery Queen?* To bring things closer home, I will here propound to Mr. Besant a conundrum. A narrative called *Paradise Lost* was written in English verse by one John Milton; what was it then? It was next translated by Chateaubriand into French prose; and what was it then? Lastly, the French translation was, by some inspired compatriot of George Gilfillan (and of mine) turned bodily into an English novel; and, in the name of clearness, what was it then?

But, once more, why should we add "fictitious"? The reason why is obvious. The reason why not, if something more recondite, does not want for weight. The art of narrative, in fact, is the same, whether it is applied to the selection and illustration of a real series of events or of an imaginary series. Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (a work of cunning and inimitable art) owes its success to the same technical manœuvres as (let us say) *Tom Jones:* the clear conception of certain characters of man, the choice and presentation of certain incidents out of a great number that offered, and the invention (yes, invention) and preservation of a certain key in dialogue. In which these things are done with the more art — in which with the greater air of nature — readers will

differently judge. Boswell's is, indeed, a very special case, and almost a generic; but it is not only in Boswell, it is in every biography with any salt of life, it is in every history where events and men, rather than ideas, are presented — in Tacitus, in Carlyle, in Michelet, in Macaulay — that the novelist will find many of his own methods most conspicuously and adroitly handled. He will find besides that he, who is free — who has the right to invent or steal a missing incident, who has the right, more precious still, of wholesale omission — is frequently defeated, and, with all his advantages, leaves a less strong impression of reality and passion. Mr. James utters his mind with a becoming fervour on the sanctity of truth to the novelist; on a more careful examination truth will seem a word of very debatable propriety, not only for the labours of the novelist, but for those of the historian. No art — to use the daring phrase of Mr. James — can successfully "compete with life"; and the art that seeks to do so is condemned to perish *montibus aviis*. Life goes before us, infinite in complication; attended by the most various and surprising meteors; appealing at once to the eye, to the ear, to the mind — the seat of wonder, to the touch — so thrillingly delicate, and to the belly — so imperious when starved. It combines and employs in its manifestation the method and material, not of one art only, but of all the arts. Music is but an arbitrary trifling with a few of life's majestic chords; painting is but a shadow of its pageantry of light and colour; literature does but drily indicate that wealth of incident, of moral obligation, of virtue, vice, action, rapture, and agony, with which it teems. To "compete with life," whose sun we cannot look upon, whose passions and diseases waste and slay us — to compete with

the flavour of wine, the beauty of the dawn, the scorching of fire, the bitterness of death and separation — here is, indeed, a projected escalade of heaven; here are, indeed, labours for a Hercules in a dress coat, armed with a pen and a dictionary to depict the passions, armed with a tube of superior flake-white to paint the portrait of the insufferable sun. No art is true in this sense: none can "compete with life": not even history, built indeed of indisputable facts, but these facts robbed of their vivacity and sting; so that even when we read of the sack of a city or the fall of an empire, we are surprised, and justly commend the author's talent, if our pulse be quickened. And mark, for a last differentia, that this quickening of the pulse is, in almost every case, purely agreeable; that these phantom reproductions of experience, even at their most acute, convey decided pleasure; while experience itself, in the cockpit of life, can torture and slay.

What, then, is the object, what the method, of an art, and what the source of its power? The whole secret is that no art does "compete with life." Man's one method, whether he reasons or creates, is to half-shut his eyes against the dazzle and confusion of reality. The arts, like arithmetic and geometry, turn away their eyes from the gross, coloured, and mobile nature at our feet, and regard instead a certain figmentary abstraction. Geometry will tell us of a circle, a thing never seen in nature; asked about a green circle or an iron circle, it lays its hand upon its mouth. So with the arts. Painting, ruefully comparing sunshine and flake-white, gives up truth of colour, as it had already given up relief and movement; and instead of vying with nature, arranges a scheme of harmonious tints. Literature, above all in

its most typical mood, the mood of narrative, similarly flees the direct challenge and pursues instead an independent and creative aim. So far as it imitates at all, it imitates not life but speech: not the facts of human destiny, but the emphasis and the suppressions with which the human actor tells of them. The real art that dealt with life directly was that of the first men who told their stories round the savage camp-fire. Our art is occupied, and bound to be occupied, not so much in making stories true as in making them typical; not so much in capturing the lineaments of each fact, as in marshalling all of them towards a common end. For the welter of impressions, all forcible but all discreet, which life presents, it substitutes a certain artificial series of impressions, all indeed most feebly represented, but all aiming at the same effect, all eloquent of the same idea, all chiming together like consonant notes in music or like the graduated tints in a good picture. From all its chapters, from all its pages, from all its sentences, the well-written novel echoes and re-echoes its one creative and controlling thought; to this must every incident and character contribute; the style must have been pitched in unison with this; and if there is anywhere a word that looks another way, the book would be stronger, clearer, and (I had almost said) fuller without it. Life is monstrous, infinite, illogical, abrupt, and poignant; a work of art, in comparison, is neat, finite, self-contained, rational, flowing, and emasculate. Life imposes by brute energy, like inarticulate thunder; art catches the ear, among the far louder noises of experience, like an air artificially made by a discreet musician. A proposition of geometry does not compete with life; and a proposition of geometry is a fair and luminous parallel for a

work of art. Both are reasonable, both untrue to the crude fact; both inhere in nature, neither represents it. The novel, which is a work of art, exists, not by its resemblances to life, which are forced and material, as a shoe must still consist of leather, but by its immeasurable difference from life, which is designed and significant, and is both the method and the meaning of the work.

The life of man is not the subject of novels, but the inexhaustible magazine from which subjects are to be selected; the name of these is legion; and with each new subject — for here again I must differ by the whole width of heaven from Mr. James — the true artist will vary his method and change the point of attack. That which was in one case an excellence, will become a defect in another; what was the making of one book, will in the next be impertinent or dull. First each novel, and then each class of novels, exists by and for itself. I will take, for instance, three main classes, which are fairly distinct: first, the novel of adventure, which appeals to certain almost sensual and quite illogical tendencies in man; second, the novel of character, which appeals to our intellectual appreciation of man's foibles and mingled and inconstant motives; and third, the dramatic novel, which deals with the same stuff as the serious theatre, and appeals to our emotional nature and moral judgment.

And first for the novel of adventure. Mr. James refers, with singular generosity of praise, to a little book about a quest for hidden treasure; but he lets fall, by the way, some rather startling words. In this book he misses what he calls the "immense luxury" of being able to quarrel with his author. The luxury, to most of us,

is to lay by our judgment, to be submerged by the tale as by a billow, and only to awake, and begin to distinguish and find fault, when the piece is over and the volume laid aside. Still more remarkable is Mr. James's reason. He cannot criticise the author, as he goes, "because," says he, comparing it with another work, "*I have been a child, but I have never been on a quest for buried treasure.*" Here is, indeed, a wilful paradox; for if he has never been on a quest for buried treasure, it can be demonstrated that he has never been a child. There never was a child (unless Master James) but has hunted gold, and been a pirate, and a military commander, and a bandit of the mountains; but has fought, and suffered shipwreck and prison, and imbrued its little hands in gore, and gallantly retrieved the lost battle, and triumphantly protected innocence and beauty. Elsewhere in his essay Mr. James has protested with excellent reason against too narrow a conception of experience; for the born artist, he contends, the "faintest hints of life" are converted into revelations; and it will be found true, I believe, in a majority of cases, that the artist writes with more gusto and effect of those things which he has only wished to do, than of those which he has done. Desire is a wonderful telescope, and Pisgah the best observatory. Now, while it is true that neither Mr. James nor the author of the work in question has ever, in the fleshly sense, gone questing after gold, it is probable that both have ardently desired and fondly imagined the details of such a life in youthful day-dreams; and the author, counting upon that, and well aware (cunning and low-minded man!) that this class of interest, having been frequently treated, finds a readily accessible and beaten road to the sympathies of the

reader, addressed himself throughout to the building up and circumstantiation of this boyish dream. Character to the boy is a sealed book; for him, a pirate is a beard, a pair of wide trousers, and a liberal complement of pistols. The author, for the sake of circumstantiation and because he was himself more or less grown up, admitted character, within certain limits, into his design; but only within certain limits. Had the same puppets figured in a scheme of another sort, they had been drawn to very different purpose; for in this elementary novel of adventure, the characters need to be presented with but one class of qualities — the warlike and formidable. So as they appear insidious in deceit and fatal in the combat, they have served their end. Danger is the matter with which this class of novel deals; fear, the passion with which it idly trifles; and the characters are portrayed only so far as they realise the sense of danger and provoke the sympathy of fear. To add more traits, to be too clever, to start the hare of moral or intellectual interest while we are running the fox of material interest, is not to enrich but to stultify your tale. The stupid reader will only be offended, and the clever reader lose the scent.

The novel of character has this difference from all others: that it requires no coherency of plot, and for this reason, as in the case of *Gil Blas*, it is sometimes called the novel of adventure. It turns on the humours of the persons represented; these are, to be sure, embodied in incidents, but the incidents themselves, being tributary, need not march in a progression; and the characters may be statically shown. As they enter, so they may go out; they must be consistent, but they need not grow. Here Mr. James will recognise the note of much of his own

work: he treats, for the most part, the statics of character, studying it at rest or only gently moved; and, with his usual delicate and just artistic instinct, he avoids those stronger passions which would deform the attitudes he loves to study, and change his sitters from the humourists of ordinary life to the brute forces and bare types of more emotional moments. In his recent *Author of Beltraffio*, so just in conception, so nimble and neat in workmanship, strong passion is indeed employed; but observe that it is not displayed. Even in the heroine the working of the passion is suppressed; and the great struggle, the true tragedy, the *scène-à-faire*, passes unseen behind the panels of a locked door. The delectable invention of the young visitor is introduced, consciously or not, to this end: that Mr. James, true to his method, might avoid the scene of passion. I trust no reader will suppose me guilty of undervaluing this little masterpiece. I mean merely that it belongs to one marked class of novel, and that it would have been very differently conceived and treated had it belonged to that other marked class, of which I now proceed to speak.

I take pleasure in calling the dramatic novel by that name, because it enables me to point out by the way a strange and peculiarly English misconception. It is sometimes supposed that the drama consists of incident. It consists of passion, which gives the actor his opportunity; and that passion must progressively increase, or the actor, as the piece proceeded, would be unable to carry the audience from a lower to a higher pitch of interest and emotion. A good serious play must therefore be founded on one of the passionate *cruces* of life, where duty and inclination come nobly to the grapple,

and the same is true of what I call, for that reason, the dramatic novel. I will instance a few worthy specimens, all of our own day and language: Meredith's *Rhoda Fleming*, that wonderful and painful book, long out of print[1] and hunted for at book-stalls like an Aldine; Hardy's *Pair of Blue Eyes;* and two of Charles Reade's, *Griffith Gaunt* and *The Double Marriage*, originally called *White Lies*, and founded (by an accident quaintly favourable to my nomenclature) on a play by Maquet, the partner of the great Dumas. In this kind of novel the closed door of *The Author of Beltraffio* must be broken open; passion must appear upon the scene and utter its last word; passion is the be-all and the end-all, the plot and the solution, the protagonist and the *deus ex machina* in one. The characters may come anyhow upon the stage: we do not care; the point is, that, before they leave it, they shall become transfigured and raised out of themselves by passion. It may be part of the design to draw them with detail; to depict a full-length character, and then behold it melt and change in the furnace of emotion. But there is no obligation of the sort; nice portraiture is not required; and we are content to accept mere abstract types, so they be strongly and sincerely moved. A novel of this class may be even great, and yet contai nno individual figure; it may be great, because it displays the workings of the perturbed heart and the impersonal utterance of passion; and with an artist of the second class it is, indeed, even more likely to be great, when the issue has thus been narrowed and the whole force of the writer's mind directed to passion alone. Cleverness again, which has its fair field in the novel of character, is debarred all entry upon this more solemn

[1] Now no longer so, thank Heaven! — *Author.*

theatre. A far-fetched motive, an ingenious evasion of the issue, a witty instead of a passionate turn, offend us like an insincerity. All should be plain, all straight-forward to the end. Hence it is that, in *Rhoda Fleming*, Mrs. Lovel raises such resentment in the reader; her motives are too flimsy, her ways are too equivocal, for the weight and strength of her surroundings. Hence the hot indignation of the reader when Balzac, after having begun the *Duchesse de Langeais* in terms of strong if somewhat swollen passion, cuts the knot by the derangement of the hero's clock. Such personages and incidents belong to the novel of character; they are out of place in the high society of the passions; when the passions are introduced in art at their full height, we look to see them, not baffled and impotently striving, as in life, but towering above circumstance and acting substitutes for fate.

And here I can imagine Mr. James, with his lucid sense, to intervene. To much of what I have said he would apparently demur; in much he would, somewhat impatiently, acquiesce. It may be true; but it is not what he desired to say or to hear said. He spoke of the finished picture and its worth when done; I, of the brushes, the palette, and the north light. He uttered his views in the tone and for the ear of good society; I, with the emphasis and technicalities of the obtrusive student. But the point, I may reply, is not merely to amuse the public, but to offer helpful advice to the young writer. And the young writer will not so much be helped by genial pictures of what an art may aspire to at its highest, as by a true idea of what it must be on the lowest terms. The best that we can say to him is this: Let him choose a motive, whether of character or passion; care-

fully construct his plot so that every incident is an illustration of the motive, and every property employed shall bear to it a near relation of congruity or contrast; avoid a sub-plot, unless, as sometimes in Shakespeare, the sub-plot be a reversion or complement of the main intrigue; suffer not his style to flag below the level of the argument; pitch the key of conversation, not with any thought of how men talk in parlours, but with a single eye to the degree of passion he may be called on to express; and allow neither himself in the narrative nor any character in the course of the dialogue, to utter one sentence that is not part and parcel of the business of the story or the discussion of the problem involved. Let him not regret if this shortens his book; it will be better so; for to add irrelevant matter is not to lengthen but to bury. Let him not mind if he miss a thousand qualities, so that he keeps unflaggingly in pursuit of the one he has chosen. Let him not care particularly if he miss the tone of conversation, the pungent material detail of the day's manners, the reproduction of the atmosphere and the environment. These elements are not essential: a novel may be excellent, and yet have none of them; a passion or a character is so much the better depicted as it rises clearer from material circumstance. In this age of the particular, let him remember the ages of the abstract, the great books of the past, the brave men that lived before Shakespeare and before Balzac. And as the root of the whole matter, let him bear in mind that his novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity. For although, in great men, working upon great motives, what we observe and admire is often their complexity, yet under-

neath appearances the truth remains unchanged: that simplification was their method, and that simplicity is their excellence.

II

Since the above was written another novelist has entered repeatedly the lists of theory: one well worthy of mention, Mr. W. D. Howells; and none ever couched a lance with narrower convictions. His own work and those of his pupils and masters singly occupy his mind; he is the bondslave, the zealot of his school; he dreams of an advance in art like what there is in science; he thinks of past things as radically dead; he thinks a form can be outlived: a strange immersion in his own history; a strange forgetfulness of the history of the race! Meanwhile, by a glance at his own works (could he see them with the eager eyes of his readers) much of this illusion would be dispelled. For while he holds all the poor little orthodoxies of the day — no poorer and no smaller than those of yesterday or to-morrow, poor and small, indeed, only so far as they are exclusive — the living quality of much that he has done is of a contrary, I had almost said of a heretical, complexion. A man, as I read him, of an originally strong romantic bent — a certain glow of romance still resides in many of his books, and lends them their distinction. As by accident he runs out and revels in the exceptional; and it is then, as often as not, that his reader rejoices — justly, as I contend. For in all this excessive eagerness to be centrally human, is there not one central human thing that Mr. Howells is too often tempted to neglect: I mean himself? A poet, a finished artist, a man in love with the appearances of life, a cunning reader of the mind, he has other passions

and aspirations than those he loves to draw. And why should he suppress himself and do such reverence to the Lemuel Barkers? The obvious is not of necessity the normal; fashion rules and deforms; the majority fall tamely into the contemporary shape, and thus attain, in the eyes of the true observer, only a higher power of insignificance; and the danger is lest, in seeking to draw the normal, a man should draw the null, and write the novel of society instead of the romance of man.

STORY-TELLING[1]

GEORGE ELIOT

1819–1880

"Story-Telling" is reprinted from *Leaves from a Notebook* (1884). Although George Eliot wrote relatively little about literary art, it is interesting to note in the essays and papers which she has left that she was quite thoroughly conscious of her own literary processes.

WHAT is the best way of telling a story? Since the standard must be the interest of the audience, there must be several or many good ways rather than one best. For we get interested in the stories life presents to us through divers orders and modes of presentation. Very commonly our first awakening to a desire of knowing a man's past or future comes from our seeing him as a stranger in some unusual or pathetic or humorous situation, or manifesting some remarkable characteristics. We make inquiries in consequence, or we become observant and attentive whenever opportunities of knowing more may happen to present themselves without our search. You have seen a refined face among the prisoners picking tow in jail; you afterwards see the same unforgettable face in a pulpit: he must be of dull fibre who would not care to know more about a life which showed such contrasts, though he might gather his knowledge in a fragmentary and unchronological way.

Again, we have heard much, or at least something not quite common, about a man whom we have never seen,

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and hence we look round with curiosity when we are told that he is present; whatever he says or does before us is charged with a meaning due to our previous hearsay knowledge about him, gathered either from dialogue of which he was expressly and emphatically the subject, or from incidental remark, or from general report either in or out of print.

These indirect ways of arriving at knowledge are always the most stirring even in relation to impersonal subjects. To see a chemical experiment gives an attractiveness to a definition of chemistry, and fills it with a significance which it would never have had without the pleasant shock of an unusual sequence, such as the transformation of a solid into gas, and *vice versa*. To see a word for the first time either as substantive or adjective in a connection where we care about knowing its complete meaning, is the way to vivify its meaning in our recollection. Curiosity becomes the more eager from the incompleteness of the first information. Moreover, it is in this way that memory works in its incidental revival of events; some salient experience appears in inward vision, and in consequence the antecedent facts are retraced from what is regarded as the beginning of the episode in which that experience made a more or less strikingly memorable part. "Ah! I remember addressing the mob from the hustings at Westminister — you wouldn't have thought that I could ever have been in such a position. Well, how I came there was in this way"; and then follows a retrospective narration.

The modes of telling a story founded on these processes of outward and inward life derive their effectiveness from the superior mastery of images and pictures in

grasping the attention, —or, one might say with more fundamental accuracy, from the fact that our earliest, strongest impressions, our most intimate convictions, are simply images added to more or less of sensation. These are the primitive instruments of thought. Hence it is not surprising that early poetry took this way, — telling a daring deed, a glorious achievement, without caring for what went before. The desire for orderly narration is a later, more reflective birth. The presence of the Jack in the box affects every child; it is the more reflective lad, the miniature philosopher, who wants to know how he got there.

The only stories life presents to us in an orderly way are those of our autobiography, or the career of our companions from our childhood upwards, or perhaps of our own children. But it is a great art to make a connected, strictly relevant narrative of such careers as we can recount from the beginning. In these cases the sequence of associations is almost sure to overmaster the sense of proportion. Such narratives *ab ovo* are summer's-day stories for happy loungers; not the cup of self-forgetting excitement to the busy who can snatch an hour of entertainment.

But the simple opening of a story with a date and necessary account of places and people, passing on quietly towards the more rousing elements of narrative and dramatic presentation, without need of retrospect, has its advantages, which have to be measured by the nature of the story. Spirited narrative, without more than a touch of dialogue here and there, may be made eminently interesting, and is suited to the novelette. Examples of its charm are seen in the short tales in which the French have a mastery never reached by the

English, who usually demand coarser flavours than are given by that delightful gayety which is well described by La Fontaine as not anything that provokes fits of laughter, but a certain charm, an agreeable mode of handling, which lends attractiveness to all subjects, even the most serious. And it is this sort of gayety which plays around the best French novelettes. But the opening chapters of the *Vicar of Wakefield* are as fine as anything that can be done in this way.

Why should a story not be told in the most irregular fashion that an author's idiosyncrasy may prompt, provided he gives us what we can enjoy? The objections to Sterne's wild way of telling *Tristram Shandy* lie more solidly in the quality of the interrupting matter than in the fact of interruption. The dear public would do well to reflect that they are often bored from the want of flexibility in their own minds. They are like the topers of "one liquor."

THE AIM OF FICTIONAL ART

JOSEPH CONRAD

1857–

This essay is the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, or *The Children of the Sea*, as the story was called in the first American edition. The Preface was not published with the book until 1914, although W. E. Henley had printed it as an afterword when he published the story serially in the *New Review* in 1897. Concerning the theory of art expressed in the Preface, Mr. Conrad says: "After writing the last words of that book, in the revulsion of feeling before the accomplished task, I understood I had done with the sea, and that henceforth I had to be a writer. And almost without laying down the pen I wrote a preface, trying to express the spirit in which I was entering on the task of my new life." And if it is permissible to make public a declaration that has been uttered privately, it may be said that Mr. Conrad still looks upon the content of the Preface as being essentially sound.

A WORK that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art should carry its justification in every line. And art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. It is an attempt to find in its forms, in its colours, in its light, in its shadows, in the aspects of matter and in the facts of life, what of each is fundamental, what is enduring and essential — their one illuminating and convincing quality — the very truth of their existence. The artist, then, like the thinker or the scientist, seeks the truth

[1] Printed by permission of Doubleday, Page and Company, Mr. Conrad's American publishers, and with his personal approval.

and makes his appeal. Impressed by the aspect of the world the thinker plunges into ideas, the scientist into facts — whence, presently, emerging they make their appeal to those qualities of our being that fit us best for the hazardous enterprise of living. They speak authoritatively to our common-sense, to our intelligence, to our desire of peace or to our desire of unrest; not seldom to our prejudices, sometimes to our fears, often to our egoism — but always to our credulity. And their words are heard with reverence, for their concern is with weighty matters; with the cultivation of our minds and the proper care of our bodies: with the attainment of our ambitions: with the perfection of the means and the glorification of our precious aims.

It is otherwise with the artist.

Confronted by the same enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities — like the vulnerable body within a steel armour. His appeal is less loud, more profound, less distinct, more stirring — and sooner forgotten. Yet its effect endures forever. The changing wisdom of successive generations discards ideas, questions facts, demolishes theories. But the artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom; to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition — and, therefore, more permanently enduring. He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery sur-

rounding our lives: to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain: to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation — and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity — the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.

It is only some such train of thought, or rather of feeling, that can in a measure explain the aim of the attempt, made in the tale which follows, to present an unrestful episode in the obscure lives of a few individuals out of all the disregarded multitude of the bewildered, the simple and the voiceless. For, if there is any part of truth in the belief confessed above, it becomes evident that there is not a place of splendour or a dark corner of the earth that does not deserve, if only a passing glance of wonder and pity. The motive, then, may be held to justify the matter of the work; but this preface, which is simply an avowal of endeavour, cannot end here — for the avowal is not yet complete.

Fiction — if it at all aspires to be art — appeals to temperament. And in truth it must be, like painting, like music, like all art, the appeal of one temperament to all the other innumerable temperaments whose subtle and resistless power endows passing events with their true meaning, and creates the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time. Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses; and, in fact, it cannot be made in any other way, because temperament, whether individual or collective, is not amenable to persuasion. All art, therefore, ap-

peals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music — which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to colour; and the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

The sincere endeavour to accomplish that creative task, to go as far on that road as his strength will carry him, to go undeterred by faltering, weariness or reproach, is the only valid justification for the worker in prose. And if his conscience is clear, his answer to those who, in the fulness of a wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused; who demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked, or charmed, must run thus: — My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you *see*. That — and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm — all you demand and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.

To snatch in a moment of courage, from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes and in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth — disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment. In a single-minded attempt of that kind, if one be deserving and fortunate, one may perchance attain to such clearness of sincerity that at last the presented vision of regret or pity, of terror or mirth, shall awaken in the hearts of the beholders that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate, which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world.

It is evident that he who, rightly or wrongly, holds by the convictions expressed above cannot be faithful to any one of the temporary formulas of his craft. The enduring part of them — the truth which each only imperfectly veils — should abide with him as the most precious of his possessions, but they all: Realism, Romanticism, Naturalism, even the unofficial sentimentalism (which like the poor, is exceedingly difficult to get rid of), all these gods must, after a short period of fellowship, abandon him — even on the very threshold of the temple — to the stammerings of his conscience and to the outspoken consciousness of the difficulties of his work. In that uneasy solitude the supreme cry of Art for Art, itself, loses the exciting ring of its apparent

immorality. It sounds far off. It has ceased to be a cry, and is heard only as a whisper, often incomprehensible, but at times and faintly encouraging.

Sometimes, stretched at ease in the shade of a roadside tree, we watch the motions of a labourer in a distant field, and after a time, begin to wonder languidly as to what the fellow may be at. We watch the movements of his body, the waving of his arms, we see him bend down, stand up, hesitate, begin again. It may add to the charm of an idle hour to be told the purpose of his exertions. If we know he is trying to lift a stone, to dig a ditch, to uproot a stump, we look with a more real interest at his efforts; we are disposed to condone the jar of his agitation upon the restfulness of the landscape; and even, if in a brotherly frame of mind, we may bring ourselves to forgive his failure. We understood his object, and, after all, the fellow has tried, and perhaps he had not the strength — and perhaps he had not the knowledge. We forgive, go on our way — and forget.

And so it is with the workman of art. Art is long and life is short, and success is very far off. And thus, doubtful of strength to travel so far, we talk a little about the aim — the aim of art, which, like life itself, is inspiring, difficult — obscured by mists. It is not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult.

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh,

for a smile — such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished — behold! — all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile — and the return to an eternal rest.

A PROBLEM IN FICTION[1]

FRANK NORRIS

1870–1902

"A Problem in Fiction" is reprinted from *The Responsibilities of the Novelist*, referred to on an earlier page. The author makes a clear and sound distinction between mere literal fact and truth.

SO many people — writers more especially — claim stridently and with a deal of gesturing that because a thing has happened it is therefore true. They have written a story, let us say, and they bring it to you to criticize. You lay your finger upon a certain passage and say "Not true to life." The author turns on you and then annihilates you — in his own mind — with the words, "But it actually happened." Of course, then, it must be true. On the contrary, it is accurate only.

For the assumption is, that truth is a higher power of accuracy — that the true thing includes the accurate; and assuming this, the authors of novels — that are not successful — suppose that if they are accurate, if they tell the thing just as they saw it, that they are truthful. It is not difficult to show that a man may be as accurate as the spectroscope and yet lie like a Chinese diplomat. As for instance: Let us suppose you have never seen a sheep, never heard of sheep, don't know sheep from shavings. It devolves upon me to enlighten your ignorance. I go out into the field and select from the flock a black sheep, bring it before you, and, with the animal there under your eyes, describe it in detail, faithfully, omitting nothing, falsifying nothing, exaggerating

[1] Used by permission of Doubleday, Page and Company.

nothing. I am painfully accurate. But you go away with the untrue conviction that all sheep are black! I have been accurate, but I have not been true.

So it is with very, very many novels, written with all earnestness and seriousness. Every incident has happened in real life, and because it is picturesque, because it is romantic, because, in a word, it is like some other novel, it is seized upon at once, and serves as the nucleus of a tale. Then, because this tale fails of success, because it fails to impress, the author blames the public, not himself. He thinks he has gone to life for his material, and so must be original, new and true. It is not so. Life itself is not always true; strange as it may seem, you may be able to say that life is not always true to life — from the point of view of the artist. It happened once that it was my unfortunate duty to tell a certain man of the violent death of his only brother, whom he had left well and happy but an hour before. This is how he took it: He threw up both hands and staggered back, precisely as they do in melodrama, exclaiming all in a breath: "Oh, my God! This is terrible! What will mother say?" You may say what you please, this man was not true to life. From the point of view of the teller of tales he was theatrical, false, untrue, and though the incident was an actual fact and though the emotion was real, it had no value as "material," and no fiction writer in his senses would have thought of using it in his story.

Naturally enough it will be asked what, then, is the standard. How shall the writer guide himself in the treatment of a pivotal, critical scene, or how shall the reader judge whether or not he is true? Perhaps, after all, the word "seem," and not the word "true," is the most important. Of course no good novelist, no good

artist, can represent life as it actually is. Nobody can, for nobody knows. Who is to say what life actually is? It seems easy — easy for us who have it and live in it and see it and hear it and feel it every millionth part of every second of the time. I say that life is actually this or that, and you say it is something else, and number three says "Lo! here," and number four says "Lo! there." Not even science is going to help you; no two photographs, even, will convey just the same impression of the same actuality; and here we are dealing not with science, but with art, that instantly involves the personality of the artist and all that that means. Even the same artist will not see the same thing twice exactly alike. His personality is one thing to-day and another thing to-morrow — is one thing before dinner and another thing after it. How, then, to determine what life actually is?

The point is just this. In the fine arts we do not care one little bit about what life actually is, but what it looks like to an interesting, impressionable man, and if he tells his story or paints his picture so that the majority of intelligent people will say, "Yes, that must have been just about what would have happened under those circumstances," he is true. His accuracy cuts no figure at all. He need not be accurate if he does not choose to be. If he sees fit to be inaccurate in order to make his point — so only his point be the conveying of a truthful impression — that is his affair. We have nothing to do with that. Consider the study of a French cuirassier by Detaille; where the sunlight strikes the brown coat of the horse, you will see, if you look close, a mere smear of blue — light blue. This is inaccurate. The horse is not blue, nor has he any blue spots. Stand

at the proper distance and the blue smear resolves itself into the glossy reflection of the sun, and the effect is true.

And in fiction: Take the fine scene in "Ivanhoe," where Rebecca, looking from the window, describes the assault upon the outer walls of the castle to the wounded knight lying on the floor in the room behind her. If you stop and think, you will see that Rebecca never could have found such elaborate language under the stress of so great excitement — those cleverly managed little climaxes in each phrase, building up to the great climax of the paragraph, all the play of rhetoric, all the nice chain and adjustment of adjectives; she could not possibly have done it. Neither you, nor I, nor any of us, with all the thought and time and labour at our command, could have ever written the passage. But is it not admirably true — true as the truth itself? It is not accurate: it is grossly, ludicrously inaccurate; but the fire and leap and vigor of it; there is where the truth is. Scott wanted you to get an impression of that assault on the barbican, and you do get it. You can hear those axes on the outer gate as plainly as Rebecca could; you can see the ladders go up, can hear them splinter, can see and feel and know all the rush and trample and smashing of that fine fight, with the Fetterlock Knight always to the fore, as no merely accurate description — accurate to five points of decimals — could ever present it.

So that one must remember the distinction, and claim no more for accuracy than it deserves — and that's but little. Anybody can be accurate — the man with the foot-rule is that. Accuracy is the attainment of small minds, the achievement of the commonplace, a mere machine-made thing that comes with niggardly research

and ciphering and mensuration and the multiplication table, good in its place, so only the place is very small. In fiction it can under certain circumstances be dispensed with altogether. It is not a thing to be striven for. To be true is the all-important business, and, once attaining that, "all other things shall be added unto you." Paint the horse pea-green if it suits your purpose; fill the mouth of Rebecca with gasconades and rhodomontades interminable: these things do not matter. It is truth that matters, and the point is whether the daubs of pea-green will look like horseflesh and the mouth-filling words create the impression of actual battle.

DE FINIBUS

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY

1811–1863

"De Finibus" appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine*, August, 1862.

WHEN Swift was in love with Stella, and despatching her a letter from London thrice a month, by the Irish packet, you may remember how he would begin Letter No. xxiii, we will say, on the very day when xxii had been sent away, stealing out of the coffee-house or the assembly so as to be able to prattle with his dear; 'never letting go her kind hand, as it were,' as some commentator or other has said in speaking of the Dean and his amour. When Mr. Johnson, walking to Dodsley's, and touching the posts in Pall Mall as he walked, forgot to pat the head of one of them, he went back and imposed his hands on it — impelled I know not by what superstition. I have this I hope not dangerous mania too. As soon as a piece of work is out of hand, and before going to sleep, I like to begin another; it may be to write only half-a-dozen lines: but that is something towards Number the Next. The printer's boy has not yet reached Green Arbour Court with the copy. Those people who were alive half-an-hour since, Pendennis, Clive Newcome, and (what do you call him? what was the name of the last hero? I remember now!) Philip Firmin, have hardly drunk their glass of wine, and the mammas have only this minute got the children's cloaks on, and have been bowed out of my premises — and here I come back to the study again:

tamen usque recurro. How lonely it looks now all these people are gone! My dear good friends, some folk are utterly tired of you, and say ' What a poverty of friends the man has! He is always asking us to meet those Pendennises, Newcomes, and so forth. Why does he not introduce us to some new characters? Why is he not thrilling like Twostars, learned and profound like Threestars, exquisitely humorous and human like Fourstars? Why, finally, is he not somebody else? ' My good people, it is not only impossible to please you all, but it is absurd to try. The dish which one man devours, another dislikes. Is the dinner of to-day not to your taste? Let us hope to-morrow's entertainment will be more agreeable. . . . I resume my original subject. What an odd, pleasant, humorous, melancholy feeling it is to sit in the study alone and quiet, now all these people are gone who have been boarding and lodging with me for twenty months! They have interrupted my rest: they have plagued me at all sorts of minutes: they have thrust themselves upon me when I was ill, or wished to be idle, and I have growled out a ' Be hanged to you, can't you leave me alone now? ' Once or twice they have prevented my going out to dinner. Many and many a time they have prevented my coming home, because I knew they were there waiting in the study, and a plague take them! and I have left home and family, and gone to dine at the Club, and told nobody where I went. They have bored me, those people. They have plagued me at all sorts of uncomfortable hours. They have made such a disturbance in my mind and house, that sometimes I have hardly known what was going on in my family and scarcely have heard what my neighbour said to me. They are gone at last, and you would

expect me to be at ease? Far from it. I should almost be glad if Woolcomb would walk in and talk to me; or Twysden reappear, take his place in that chair opposite me, and begin one of his tremendous stories.

Madmen, you know, see visions, hold conversations with, even draw the likeness of, people invisible to you and me. Is this making of people out of fancy madness? and are novel-writers at all entitled to strait-waistcoats? I often forget people's names in life; and in my own stories contritely own that I make dreadful blunders regarding them; but I declare, my dear sir, with respect to the personages introduced into your humble servant's fables, I know the people utterly — I know the sound of their voices. A gentleman came in to see me the other day, who was so like the picture of Philip Firmin in Mr. Walker's charming drawings in the *Cornhill Magazine* that he was quite a curiosity to me. The same eyes, beard, shoulders, just as you have seen them from month to month. Well, he is not like the Philip Firmin in my mind. Asleep, asleep in the grave, lies the bold, the generous, the reckless, the tender-hearted creature whom I have made to pass through those adventures which have just been brought to an end. It is years since I heard the laughter ringing, or saw the bright blue eyes. When I knew him both were young. I become young as I think of him. And this morning he was alive again in this room, ready to laugh, to fight, to weep. As I write, do you know, it is the grey of evening; the house is quiet; everybody is out; the room is getting a little dark, and I look rather wistfully up from the paper with perhaps ever so little fancy that HE MAY COME IN. —— No? No movement. No grey shade, growing more palpable, out of which at last look the well-known

eyes. No, the printer came and took him away with the last page of the proofs. And with the printer's boy did the whole cortège of ghosts flit away, invisible! Ha! stay! what is this? Angels and ministers of grace! The door opens, and a dark form — enters, bearing a black — a black suit of clothes. It is John. He says it is time to dress for dinner.

. . . . . .

Every man who has had his German tutor, and has been coached through the famous 'Faust' of Goethe (thou wert my instructor, good old Weissenborn, and these eyes beheld the great master himself in dear little Weimar town!) has read those charming verses which are prefixed to the drama, in which the poet reverts to the time when his work was first composed, and recalls the friends now departed, who once listened to his song. The dear shadows rise up around him, he says; he lives in the past again. It is to-day which appears vague and visionary. We humbler writers cannot create Fausts, or raise up monumental works that shall endure for all ages; but our books are diaries, in which our own feelings must of necessity be set down. As we look to the page written last month, or ten years ago, we remember the day and its events; the child ill, mayhap, in the adjoining room, and the doubts and fears which racked the brain as it still pursued its work; the dear old friend who read the commencement of the tale, and whose gentle hand shall be laid in ours no more. I own for my part that, in reading pages which this hand penned formerly, I often lose sight of the text under my eyes. It is not the words I see; but that past day; that bygone page of life's history; that tragedy, comedy it may be, which our little home-company was enacting; that merry-making

which we shared; that funeral which we followed; that bitter, bitter grief which we buried.

And, such being the state of my mind, I pray gentle readers to deal kindly with their humble servant's manifold shortcomings, blunders, and slips of memory. As sure as I read a page of my own composition, I find a fault or two, half-a-dozen. Jones is called Brown. Brown, who is dead, is brought to life. Aghast, and months after the number was printed, I saw that I had called Philip Firmin, Clive Newcome. Now Clive Newcome is the hero of another story by the reader's most obedient writer. The two men are as different in my mind's eye, as — as Lord Palmerston and Mr. Disraeli, let us say. But there is that blunder at page 990, line 76, volume 84 of the *Cornhill Magazine*, and it is past mending; and I wish in my life I had made no worse blunders or errors than that which is hereby acknowledged.

Another Finis written. Another mile-stone passed on this journey from birth to the next world! Sure it is a subject for solemn cogitation. Shall we continue this story-telling business and be voluble to the end of our age! Will it not be presently time, O prattler, to hold your tongue, and let younger people speak? I have a friend, a painter, who, like other persons who shall be nameless, is growing old. He has never painted with such laborious finish as his works now show. This master is still the most humble and diligent of scholars. Of Art, his mistress, he is always an eager, reverent pupil. In his calling, in yours, in mine, industry and humility will help and comfort us. A word with you. In a pretty large experience I have not found the men who write books superior in wit or learning to those who don't write at all. In regard of mere information, non-writers

must often be superior to writers. You don't expect a lawyer in full practice to be conversant with all kinds of literature; he is too busy with his law; and so a writer is commonly too busy with his own books to be able to bestow attention on the works of other people. After a day's work (in which I have been depicting, let us say, the agonies of Louisa on parting with the Captain, or the atrocious behaviour of the wicked Marquis to Lady Emily) I march to the Club, proposing to improve my mind and keep myself 'posted up,' as the Americans phrase it, in the literature of the day. And what happens? Given a walk after luncheon, a pleasing book, and a most comfortable arm-chair by the fire, and you know the rest. A doze ensues. Pleasing book drops suddenly, is picked up once with an air of some confusion, is laid presently softly in lap: head falls on comfortable arm-chair cushion; eyes close: soft nasal music is heard. Am I telling Club secrets? Of afternoons, after lunch, I say, scores of sensible fogies have a doze. Perhaps I have fallen asleep over that very book to which 'Finis' has just been written. 'And if the writer sleeps, what happens to the readers?' says Jones, coming down upon me with his lightning wit. What? you *did* sleep over it? And a very good thing too. These eyes have more than once seen a friend dozing over pages which this hand has written. There is a vignette somewhere in one of my books of a friend so caught napping with 'Pendennis,' or the 'Newcomes,' in his lap; and if a writer can give you a sweet, soothing, harmless sleep, has he not done you a kindness? So is the author who excites and interests you worthy of your thanks and benedictions. I am troubled with fever and ague, that seize me at odd intervals and prostrate me for a day. There is cold fit,

for which, I am thankful to say, hot brandy-and-water is prescribed; and this induces hot fit, and so on. In one or two of these fits I have read novels with the most fearful contentment of mind. Once on the Mississippi, it was my dearly beloved 'Jacob Faithful': once, at Frankfort O. M., the delightful 'Vingt Ans Après' of Monsieur Dumas: once, at Tunbridge Wells, the thrilling 'Woman in White': and these books gave me amusement from morning till sunset. I remember those ague fits with a great deal of pleasure and gratitude. Think of a whole day in bed, and a good novel for a companion! No cares: no remorse about idleness: no visitors: and the Woman in White or the Chevalier d'Artagnan to tell me stories from dawn to night! 'Please, ma'am, my master's compliments, and can he have the third volume?' (This message was sent to an astonished friend and neighbour who lent me, volume by volume, the 'W. in W.') How do you like your novels? I like mine strong, 'hot with,' and no mistake; no love-making: no observations about society: little dialogue, except where the characters are bullying each other: plenty of fighting: and a villain in the cupboard, who is to suffer tortures just before Finis. I don't like your melancholy Finis. I never read the history of a consumptive heroine twice. If I might give a short hint to an impartial writer (as the *Examiner* used to say in old days), it would be to act, *not* à la mode le pays de Pole (I think that was the phraseology) but *always* to give quarter. In the story of Philip, just come to an end, I have the permission of the author to state that he was going to drown the two villains of the piece — a certain Doctor F—— and a certain Mr. T. H—— on board the 'President,' or some other tragic ship — but you see I

relented. I pictured to myself Firmin's ghastly face amid the crowd of shuddering people on that reeling deck in the lonely ocean and thought, 'Thou ghastly lying wretch, thou shalt not be drowned; thou shalt have a fever only; a knowledge of thy danger; and a chance — ever so small a chance of repentance.' I wonder whether he *did* repent when he found himself in the yellow-fever, in Virginia? The probability is, he fancied that his son had injured him very much, and forgave him on his death-bed. Do you imagine there is a great deal of genuine right-down remorse in the world? Don't people rather find excuses which make their minds easy; endeavour to prove to themselves that they have been lamentably belied and misunderstood; and try and forgive the persecutors who *will* present that bill when it is due; and not bear malice against the cruel ruffian who takes them to the police-office for stealing the spoons? Years ago I had a quarrel with a certain well-known person (I believed a statement regarding him which his friends imparted to me, and which turned out to be quite incorrect). To his dying day that quarrel was never quite made up. I said to his brother, 'Why is your brother's soul still dark against me? It is I who ought to be angry and unforgiving: for I was in the wrong.' In the region which they now inhabit (for Finis has been set to the volumes of the lives of both here below), if they take any cognisance of our squabbles, and tittle-tattles, and gossips on earth here, I hope they admit that my little error was not of a nature unpardonable. If you have never committed a worse, my good sir, surely the score against you will not be heavy. Ha, *dilectissimi fratres!* It is in regard of sins *not* found out that we may say or sing (in an undertone in a most

penitent and lugubrious minor key), 'Miserere nobis miseris peccatoribus.'

Among the sins of commission which novel-writers not seldom perpetrate, is the sin of grandiloquence, or tall-talking, against which, for my part, I will offer up a special *libera me*. This is the sin of schoolmasters, governesses, critics, sermoners, and instructors of young or old people. Nay (for I am making a clean breast, and liberating my soul), perhaps of all the novel-spinners now extant, the present speaker is the most addicted to preaching. Does he not stop perpetually in his story and begin to preach to you? When he ought to be engaged with business, is he not for ever taking the Muse by the sleeve, and plaguing her with some of his cynical sermons? I cry *peccavi* loudly and heartily. I tell you I would like to be able to write a story which should show no egotism whatever — in which there should be no reflections, no cynicism, no vulgarity (and so forth), but an incident in every other page, a villain, a battle, a mystery in every chapter. I should like to be able to feed a reader so spicily as to leave him hungering and thirsting for more at the end of every monthly meal.

Alexandre Dumas describes himself, when inventing the plan of a work, as lying silent on his back for two whole days on the deck of a yacht in a Mediterranean port. At the end of the two days he arose and called for dinner. In those two days he had built his plot. He had moulded a mighty clay, to be cast presently in perennial brass. The chapters, the characters, the incidents, the combinations were all arranged in the artist's brain ere he set a pen to paper. My Pegasus won't fly, so as to let me survey the field below me. He has no wings, he is

blind of one eye certainly; he is restive, stubborn, slow; crops a hedge when he ought to be galloping, or gallops when he ought to be quiet. He never will show off when I want him. Sometimes he goes at a pace which surprises me. Sometimes, when I most wish him to make the running, the brute turns restive, and I am obliged to let him take his own time. I wonder do other novel-writers experience this fatalism? They *must* go a certain way, in spite of themselves. I have been surprised at the observations made by some of my characters. It seems as if an occult Power was moving the pen. The personage does or says something, and I ask, How the dickens did he come to think of that? Every man has remarked in dreams, the vast dramatic power which is sometimes evinced; I won't say the surprising power, for nothing does surprise you in dreams. But those strange characters you meet make instant observations of which you never can have thought previously. In like manner, the imagination foretells things. We spake anon of the inflated style of some writers. What also if there is an *afflated* style — when a writer is like a Pythoness on her oracle tripod, and mighty words, words which he cannot help, come blowing, and bellowing, and whistling, and moaning through the speaking pipes of his bodily organ? I have told you it was a very queer shock to me the other day when, with a letter of introduction in his hand, the artist's (not my) Philip Firmin walked into this room, and sat down in the chair opposite. In the novel of 'Pendennis,' written ten years ago, there is an account of a certain Costigan, whom I had invented (as I suppose authors invent their personages out of scraps, heel-taps, odds and ends of characters). I was smoking in a tavern parlour one

night — and this Costigan came into the room alive — the very man: — the most remarkable resemblance of the printed sketches of the man, of the rude drawings in which I had depicted him. He had the same little coat, the same battered hat, cocked on one eye, the same twinkle in that eye. ' Sir,' said I, knowing him to be an old friend whom I had met in unknown regions, ' Sir,' I said, ' may I offer you a glass of brandy-and-water? ' ' *Bedad, ye may*,' says he, ' *and I'll sing ye a song tu*.' Of course he spoke with an Irish brogue. Of course he had been in the army. In ten minutes he pulled out an Army Agent's account, whereon his name was written. A few months after we read of him in a police-court. How had I come to know him, to divine him? Nothing shall convince me that I have not seen that man in the world of spirits. In the world of spirits and water I know I did: but that is a mere quibble of words. I was not surprised when he spoke in an Irish brogue. I had had cognisance of him before somehow. Who has not felt that little shock which arises when a person, a place, some words in a book (there is always a collocation) present themselves to you, and you know that you have before met the same person, words, scene, and so forth?

They used to call the good Sir Walter the ' Wizard of the North.' What if some writer should appear who can write so *enchantingly* that he shall be able to call into actual life the people whom he invents? What if Mignon, and Margaret, and Goetz von Berlichingen are alive now (though I don't say they are visible), and Dugald Dalgetty and Ivanhoe were to step in at that open window by the little garden yonder? Suppose Uncas and our noble old Leather-stocking were to glide silently in? Suppose Athos, Porthos, and Aramis should enter

with a noiseless swagger, curling their moustaches? And dearest Amelia Booth, on uncle Toby's arm; and Tittlebat Titmouse, with his hair dyed green; and all the Crummles company of comedians, with the Gil Blas troop; and Sir Roger de Coverley; and the greatest of all crazy gentlemen, the Knight of La Mancha, with his blessed squire? I say to you, I look rather wistfully towards the window, musing upon these people. Were any of them to enter, I think I should not be very much frightened. Dear old friends, what pleasant hours I have had with them! We do not see each other very often, but when we do, we are ever happy to meet. I had a capital half-hour with Jacob Faithful last night; when the last sheet was corrected, when 'Finis,' had been written, and the printer's boy, with the copy, was safe in Green Arbour Court.

So you are gone, little printer's boy, with the last scratches and corrections on the proof, and a fine flourish by way of Finis at the story's end. The last corrections? I say those last corrections seem never to be finished. A plague upon the weeds! Every day, when I walk in my own little literary garden-plot, I spy some, and should like to have a spud, and root them out. Those idle words, neighbour, are past remedy. That turning back to the old pages produces anything but elation of mind. Would you not pay a pretty fine to be able to cancel some of them? Oh, the sad old pages, the dull old pages! Oh, the cares, the *ennui*, the squabbles, the repetitions, the old conversations over and over again. But now and again a kind thought is recalled, and now and again a dear memory. Yet a few chapters more, and then the last: after which, behold Finis itself comes to an end, and the Infinite begun.

IV. THE QUESTION OF STYLE

DISCOURSE ON STYLE

GEORGES-LOUIS LECLERC DE BUFFON

1707–1788

Buffon delivered his address on style before the French Academy on August 25, 1753. The address is interesting not only because it is a sound discussion of a difficult subject, but because the author of it was a scientist rather than a man of letters. It is known to most persons because of one sentence, "The style is the man himself," which was in reality an afterthought that Buffon incorporated in the address at some time subsequent to his delivery of a copy to the president of the Academy, but before he spoke on the day of his reception.

The translation that follows is based upon the text edited by Monsieur René Nollet (Librairie Hachette et Cie, Paris, 1905). In making this translation the editor has kept the sentence divisions of the French wherever the meaning in English has not suffered too violently from the numerous semicolons and colons. The essay has been translated also by Professor Lane Cooper, of Cornell University, in his *Theories of Style* (The Macmillan Company, New York).

Gentlemen:

In calling me to a place among you, you have overwhelmed me with honor; but glory is a good only in so far as one is worthy of it, and I am not convinced that some essays written without art and without other ornament than that of Nature, should be sufficient title to make me dare take a place among the masters of art, among the eminent men who represent here the literary splendor of France, and whose names, celebrated to-day among the nations of the world, will be heard from the lips of our remotest posterity. In turning to me, Gentle-

men, you have had other motives; you have wished to give a new mark of respect to the illustrious company to which for a long time I have had the honor of belonging. My appreciation, though thus shared by others, will not be less lively. But how shall I perform the duty that it places upon me to-day? I have nothing to offer you, Gentlemen, save what is already your own: some ideas on style, which I have drawn from your works. It was in reading you and in admiring you that I conceived them; it is in submitting them to your intelligence that I am assured of their appreciation.

In all times there have been men who could rule others by the power of speech. Nevertheless, it is only in enlightened times that men have written and spoken well. True eloquence supposes the exercise of genius and the cultivation of the mind. It is quite different from that natural facility of speaking which is only a talent, a quality accorded to all those whose passions are strong, whose voices are flexible, and whose imaginations are quick. These men perceive vividly, are affected vividly, and reveal emotion strongly; and by an impression purely mechanical, they transmit to others their enthusiasm and their affections. It is body speaking to body; all the movements, all the gestures, contribute alike in serving this end. What is necessary in order to arouse the multitude and lead it on? What is necessary in order to agitate most other men and persuade them? A tone vehement and pathetic, gestures expressive and frequent, and words rapid and ringing. But for the small number whose heads are steady, whose taste is delicate, and whose feeling is refined, and who, like you, Gentlemen, attach little importance to tuneful movement, gestures, and the vain sound of words, it

is necessary to have substance, thoughts, arguments; and it is necessary to know how to present them, to shade them, to order them: it is not enough to strike the ear and hold the eye; one must influence the soul and touch the heart by addressing the mind.

Style is but the order and the movement that one gives to one's thoughts. If a writer connects his thoughts closely, if he presses them together, the style will be firm, nervous, and concise; if he lets them follow one another leisurely and at the suggestion of the words, however elegant these may be, the style will be diffuse, incoherent, and languid.

But, before seeking the order in which to present thoughts, the writer must form another more general and more rigid order where only large views and principal ideas should enter. It is by fixing their places in this preliminary plan that he circumscribes the subject and comes to know its extent; it is by recalling constantly these first limits that he will determine the exact intervals which separate the principal ideas, and will develop those accessory and intermediary ideas which shall serve to round out the original conception. By force of genius he will visualize all of the general and particular ideas in their true perspective; by a great subtlety of discernment, he will distinguish the thoughts that are sterile from those that are fertile; by a sagacity born of long practice in writing, he will perceive in advance the product of all of these operations of the mind. If a subject be in any degree vast or complex, it is very seldom that one can encompass it at a single view, or penetrate it completely by a single and first effort of genius; and it is seldom, even after much reflection, that one can seize upon all the relations. One cannot, then,

devote himself too completely to this process; it is, in truth, the only means of establishing, of extending, and of elevating one's thoughts: the more substance and force one gives to them by meditation, the easier it will be afterward to realize them through expression.

This plan is not indeed the style, but it is the foundation; it supports the style, directs it, governs its movement, and subjects it to law; without it, the best writer will lose his way, and his pen will run on unguided and by hazard will make uncertain strokes and incongruous figures. However brilliant be the colors he employs, whatever beauties he may scatter among the details, if the ensemble jars or does not make itself sufficiently felt, the work will not be constructed; and in admiring the brilliancy of the author, one must suspect that he is lacking in genius. It is for this reason that those who write as they speak, though they speak very well, write poorly; that those who abandon themselves to the first heat of their imagination strike a tone that they cannot sustain; that those who fear to lose some isolated, fugitive thoughts, and who write at different times these detached fragments, cannot unite them without forced transitions; that, in a word, there are so many works made mosaic-fashion and so few cast in a single mould.

Nevertheless, every subject is a unit; and however vast it may be, it can be comprehended in a single treatise. Interruptions, pauses, and sections should not be employed except when one treats different subjects, or when, having to discuss great matters that are knotty and disparate, the march of genius finds itself interrupted by the multiplicity of obstacles, and constrained by force of circumstances: otherwise, the numerous divisions, far from rendering a work more solid, destroy

the ensemble; the book appears to the eye to be clearer, but the design of the author remains obscure; the impression on the reader's mind, or even on his feelings, can be made only by the continuity of the thread, by the harmonious dependence of ideas, by a successive development, a sustained gradation, a uniform movement which every interruption destroys, or at least enfeebles.

Why are works of Nature so perfect? It is because each work is a whole, and because Nature works according to a plan from which she never departs; she prepares in silence the germs of her productions; she sketches in a single act the original form of every living being; she develops this, she perfects it, by a continuous movement and in a time prescribed. The resulting production astonishes us; but it is the divine imprint it bears that ought to strike us. The human mind can create nothing; it can produce only after it has been fertilized by experience and meditation; its acquisitions are the germs of its productions: but, if it imitates Nature in its procedure and in its labor, if it lifts itself up by contemplation to the most sublime truths; if it reunites them, if it binds them together, if by reflection it forms of them a systematic whole, it will establish on unshakable foundations monuments that shall prove immortal.

It is from lack of plan, from lack of reflection on his purpose, that a man of sheer intelligence finds himself embarrassed and does not know at what point to begin to write. He perceives, all at the same time, a great number of ideas; and, since he has neither compared them nor subordinated them, nothing leads him to prefer any of them to the others; so he remains in perplexity.

But when he has made a plan, when once he has brought together and put in order all the thoughts essential to his subject, he will see easily the instant when he ought to take up his pen, he will feel with certainty that his mind is ready to bring forth, he will be pressed to give birth to his ideas, and will find only pleasure in writing: his ideas will succeed each other easily, and the style will be natural and ready; the warmth born of this pleasure will diffuse itself everywhere and give life to each expression; the animation will become higher and higher; the tone will become exalted; objects will take on color; and feeling blended with intellect will increase the warm glow, will carry it farther, will make it pass from that which one says to that which one is about to say, and the style will become interesting and luminous.

Nothing is more directly opposed to this warmth than the desire to fill one's work with brilliant strokes; nothing is more contrary to the light which should form the center and diffuse itself uniformly in any writing, than the sparks which one can strike only by dashing the words against one another, and which dazzle us during a few moments, only to leave us in darkness afterward. These are thoughts which sparkle only by contrast: by means of them one presents only a single side of an object, and puts all the other sides in shadow; and ordinarily the side chosen is a point, an angle, on which one exercises the mind with the greater facility the farther one departs from the important sides on which good sense is accustomed to consider things.

Again, nothing is more opposed to true eloquence than the employment of these over-refined thoughts and the searching out of ideas which are trifling, slender, and

without substance, and which, like leaves of beaten metal, take on brilliancy only as they lose solidity. And, the more of this thin and sparkling wit one puts in a piece of writing, the less there will be of fibre, of intelligence, of warmth, and of style; unless, of course, this wit is itself the heart of the subject, and the writer has no other object than pleasantry: then the art of expressing trifles becomes more difficult, perhaps, than the art of expressing great things.

Nothing is more opposed to the beauty born of naturalness than the care so often taken to express ordinary, common matters in an unusual or pompous manner; nothing degrades a writer more. Far from admiring him, one pities him for having spent so much time in making new combinations of syllables only to say what everybody else says. This is a fault of minds that are cultivated but sterile; they have an abundance of words, but no ideas; they labor on their words, therefore, and imagine that they have woven together some ideas when they have only arranged some sentences, and that they have refined the language when in truth they have corrupted it by perverting the usual significations. A style ought to engrave thoughts; but they know only how to trace out words.

To write well, then, one must possess a complete mastery of the subject-matter; one must reflect upon it sufficiently to see clearly the order of the thoughts, and to put them in sequence, in a continuous chain, of which each part represents an idea; and when one has taken up the pen, one must direct it according to this outline, without making digression, without dwelling disproportionately on any point, and without developing any other movement than that which will be determined by

the space to be traversed. It is just this that constitutes severity in style; it is this also that makes for unity and regulates the rapidity of movement; it is this alone, moreover, that will suffice to render a style precise and simple, even and clear, lively and coherent. If to this first rule, which is based upon the dictates of genius, one join discrimination and taste, scrupulousness in the choice of expression, care in the naming of things only by the most general terms, the style will have nobility. If one add, further, a distrust of his first inspiration, a disdain for that which is merely brilliant, and a constant aversion for the equivocal and the whimsical, the style will have gravity and even majesty. In brief, if an author writes as he thinks, if he is himself convinced of that which he wishes to establish in the minds of others, this good faith with himself, which makes for respect toward others and for truthfulness of style, will enable him to produce his entire intended effect — provided that this inner conviction does not reflect itself with too great enthusiasm and that there is everywhere more candor than confidence, more reason than warmth.

It is thus, Gentlemen, it seems in reading you, that you would speak to me, that you would instruct me. My soul, which has received with avidity these oracles of wisdom, would take flight and rise to your heights; vain effort! Rules, you would add, cannot take the place of genius; if that be wanting, rules will be useless. To write well, — it is at once to think well, to experience well, and to express well; it is to have at once intelligence, sensibility, and taste. Style supposes the blending and the exercise of all the intellectual powers. Ideas alone form its basis; the harmony of words is a mere accessory dependent upon the senses. All that is re-

quired is to have an ear for detecting dissonances, to have exercised it and perfected it by the reading of poets and orators, and one will be led mechanically to imitate poetical cadence and turns of oratory. But imitation never created anything; hence this harmony of words forms neither the basis nor the tone of style, and is often found in writings that are void of ideas.

Tone is merely the agreement of style and subject-matter. It should never be forced; it springs naturally from the character of the material, and depends in large measure upon the point of generalization to which one has advanced. If one rises to the most general ideas, and if the purpose itself is great, the tone will be seen to lift itself to the same height; and if in sustaining the tone at this height, one's genius is strong enough to give to each object a strong light, if one can add beauty of coloring to energy of design, if one can, in a word, represent each idea by an image that is vivid and well-defined, and form of each group of ideas a picture that is harmonious and animated, the tone will be not only elevated, but sublime.

Here, Gentlemen, the application would count for more than the rule; examples would instruct better than precept; but since I am not permitted to quote the sublime passages which have so often transported me in reading your works, I am obliged to limit myself to reflections. The well-written works are the only ones that will pass down to posterity: quantity of information, singularity of facts, novelty of discoveries even, are not sure guaranties of immortality. If the works containing these center around small purposes, if they are written without taste, without nobility, and without genius, they will perish. Inasmuch as the knowledge,

the facts, and the discoveries are easily detached, they pass on to others, and they even gain when used by more skillful hands. These things are external to the man; the style is the man himself. The style, then, can neither be detached, nor transferred, nor altered: if it is lofty, noble, sublime, the author will be admired equally in all times; for it is the truth alone that is durable, even eternal. A beautiful style is such, in fact, only by the infinite number of truths that it presents. All the intellectual beauties to be found in it, all the harmonies of which it is composed, are so many truths not less useful — perhaps even more precious for the human spirit — than those which form the very heart of the subject.

The sublime is to be found only in great subjects. Poetry, history, and philosophy all have the same subject-matter, and a very great subject-matter, — man and Nature. Philosophy describes and portrays Nature; poetry depicts and embellishes it: poetry also depicts men, exalts them, magnifies them, and creates heroes and gods. History depicts man only, and depicts him as he is; so the tone of the historian will become sublime only when he portrays the greatest men, when he sets forth the greatest actions, the greatest movements, the greatest revolutions; with these exceptions, it will suffice if he be majestic and grave. The tone of the philosopher will become sublime whenever he is to speak of the laws of Nature, of beings in general, of space, of matter, of movement and time, of the soul, of the human mind, of the feelings, of the passions; in all other instances, it will suffice if he be noble and elevated. But the tone of the orator and the poet, inasmuch as their subject is lofty, ought always to be sublime, because they may add to

the grandeur of their subject as much color, as much movement, as much illusion as they choose; and since they must always portray and exalt objects, they ought always, in consequence, to employ all the force and display all the extent of their genius.

THE SINEWS OF STYLE[1]

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

1817–1862

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, from which this passage is taken, was originally published by Thoreau, at his own expense, in 1849 — ten years after he had made his notes on the trip (August 31–September 6, 1839). It scarcely need be pointed out that his own style possesses the compact strength and the atmosphere of out-of-doors for which he pleads.

ENOUGH has been said in these days of the charm of fluent writing. We hear it complained of some works of genius that they have fine thoughts, but are irregular and have no flow. But even the mountain peaks in the horizon are, to the eye of science, parts of one range. We should consider that the flow of thought is more like a tidal wave than a prone river, and is the result of a celestial influence, not of any declivity in its channel. The river flows because it runs down hill, and flows the faster, the faster it descends. The reader who expects to float downstream for the whole voyage may well complain of nauseating swells and choppings of the sea when his frail shore craft gets amidst the billows of the ocean stream, which flows as much to sun and moon as lesser streams to it. But if we would appreciate the flow that is in these books, we must expect to feel it rise from the page like an exhalation, and wash away our critical brains like burr millstones, flowing to higher levels above and behind ourselves. There is many a

[1] Printed by permission of, and by special arrangement with, Houghton Mifflin Company.

book which ripples on like a freshet, and flows as glibly as a mill-stream sucking under a causeway; and when their authors are in the full tide of their discourse, Pythagoras and Plato and Jamblichus halt beside them. Their long, stringy, slimy sentences are of that consistency that they naturally flow and run together. They read as if written for military men, for men of business, there is such a dispatch in them. Compared with these, the grave thinkers and philosophers seem not to have got their swaddling-clothes off; they are slower than a Roman army in its march, the rear camping to-night where the van camped last night. The wise Jamblichus eddies and gleams like a watery slough.

> How many thousands never heard the name
> Of Sidney, or of Spenser, or their books!
> And yet brave fellows, and presume of fame,
> And seem to bear down all the world with looks!

The ready writer seizes the pen and shouts "Forward! Alamo and Fanning!" and after rolls the tide of war. The very walls and fences seem to travel. But the most rapid trot is no flow after all; and thither, reader, you and I, at least, will not follow.

A perfectly healthy sentence, it is true, is extremely rare. For the most part we miss the hue and fragrance of the thought; as if we could be satisfied with the dews of the morning or evening without their colors, or the heavens without their azure. The most attractive sentences are, perhaps, not the wisest, but the surest and roundest. They are spoken firmly and conclusively, as if the speaker had a right to know what he says, and if not wise, they have at least been well learned. Sir Walter Raleigh might well be studied, if only for the excellence of his style, for he is remarkable in the midst

of so many masters. There is a natural emphasis in his style, like a man's tread, and a breathing space between the sentences, which the best of modern writing does not furnish. His chapters are like English parks, or say rather like a Western forest, where the larger growth keeps down the underwood, and one may ride on horseback through the openings. All the distinguished writers of that period possess a greater vigor and naturalness than the more modern, — for it is allowed to slander our own time, — and when we read a quotation from one of them in the midst of a modern author, we seem to have come suddenly upon a greener ground, a greater depth and strength of soil. It is as if a green bough were laid across the page, and we are refreshed as by the sight of fresh grass in midwinter or early spring. You have constantly the warrant of life and experience in what you read. The little that is said is eked out by implication of the much that was done. The sentences are verdurous and blooming as evergreen and flowers, because they are rooted in fact and experience, but our false and florid sentences have only the tints of flowers without their sap or roots. All men are really most attracted by the beauty of plain speech, and they even write in a florid style in imitation of this. They prefer to be misunderstood rather than to come short of its exuberance. Hussein Effendi praised the epistolary style of Ibrahim Pasha to the French traveler Botta, because of "the difficulty of understanding it; there was," he said, "but one person at Jidda who was capable of understanding and explaining the Pasha's correspondence." A man's whole life is taxed for the least thing well done. It is its net result. Every sentence is the result of a long probation. Where shall we look for

standard English but to the words of a standard man? The word which is best said came nearest to not being spoken at all, for it is cousin to a deed which the speaker could have better done. Nay, almost it must have taken the place of a deed by some urgent necessity, even by some misfortune, so that the truest writer will be some captive knight, after all. And perhaps the fates had such a design, when, having stored Raleigh so richly with the substance of life and experience, they made him a fast prisoner, and compelled him to make his words his deeds, and transfer to his expression the emphasis and sincerity of his action.

Men have a respect for scholarship and learning greatly out of proportion to the use they commonly serve. We are amused to read how Ben Jonson engaged that the dull masks with which the royal family and nobility were to be entertained should be "grounded upon antiquity and solid learning." Can there be any greater reproach than an idle learning? Learn to split wood, at least. The necessity of labor and conversation with many men and things, to the scholar is rarely well remembered; steady labor with the hands, which engrosses the attention also, is unquestionably the best method of removing palaver and sentimentality out of one's style, both of speaking and writing. If he has worked hard from morning till night, though he may have grieved that he could not be watching the train of his thoughts during that time, yet the few hasty lines which at evening record his day's experience will be more musical and true than his freest but idle fancy could have furnished. Surely the writer is to address a world of laborers, and such therefore must be his own discipline. He will not idly dance at his work who has

wood to cut and cord before nightfall in the short days of winter; but every stroke will be husbanded, and ring soberly through the wood; and so will the strokes of that scholar's pen, which at evening record the story of the day, ring soberly, yet cheerily, on the ear of the reader, long after the echoes of his axe have died away. The scholar may be sure that he writes the tougher truth for the calluses on his palms. They give firmness to the sentence. Indeed, the mind never makes a great and successful effort, without a corresponding energy of the body. We are often struck by the force and precision of style to which hard-working men, unpracticed in writing, easily attain when required to make the effort. As if plainness and vigor and sincerity, the ornaments of style, were better learned on the farm and in the workshop than in the schools. The sentences written by such rude hands are nervous and tough, like hardened thongs, the sinews of the deer, or the roots of the pine. As for the graces of expression, a great thought is never found in a mean dress; but though it proceed from the lips of the Wolofs, the nine Muses and the three Graces will have conspired to clothe it in fit phrase. Its education has always been liberal, and its implied wit can endow a college. The world, which the Greeks called Beauty, has been made such by being gradually divested of every ornament which was not fitted to endure. The Sibyl, "speaking with inspired mouth, smileless, inornate, and unperfumed, pierces through centuries by the power of the god." The scholar might frequently emulate the propriety and emphasis of the farmer's call to his team, and confess that if that were written it would surpass his labored sentences. Whose are the truly *labored* sentences? From the weak and flimsy

periods of the politician and literary man, we are glad to turn even to the description of work, the simple record of the month's labor in the farmer's almanac, to restore our tone and spirits. A sentence should read as if its author, had he held a plough instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow deep and straight to the end. The scholar requires hard and serious labor to give an impetus to his thought. He will learn to grasp the pen firmly so, and wield it gracefully and effectively, as an axe or a sword. When we consider the weak and nerveless periods of some literary men, who perchance in feet and inches come up to the standard of their race, and are not deficient in girth also, we are amazed at the immense sacrifice of thews and sinews. What! these proportions, — these bones, — and this their work! Hands which could have felled an ox have hewed this fragile matter which would not have tasked a lady's fingers! Can this be a stalwart man's work, who has a marrow in his back and a tendon Achilles in his heel? They who set up the blocks of Stonehenge did somewhat, if they only laid out their strength for once, and stretched themselves.

Yet, after all, the truly efficient laborer will not crowd his day with work, but will saunter to his task, surrounded by a wide halo of ease and leisure, and then do but what he loves best. He is anxious only about the fruitful kernels of time. Though the hen should sit all day, she could lay only one egg, and, besides, would not have picked up materials for another. Let a man take time enough for the most trivial deed, though it be but the paring of his nails. The buds swell imperceptibly, without hurry or confusion, as if the short spring days were an eternity.

> Then spend an age in whetting thy desire,
> Thou need'st not *hasten* if thou dost *stand fast.*

Some hours seem not to be occasion for any deed, but for resolves to draw breath in. We do not directly go about the execution of the purpose that thrills us, but shut our doors behind us and ramble with prepared mind, as if the half were already done. Our resolution is taking root or hold on the earth then, as seeds first send a shoot downward which is fed by their own albumen, ere they send one upward to the light.

STYLE AS ORGANIC AND AS MECHANIC

THOMAS DE QUINCEY

1785–1859

The "Essay on Style," from which the following passage is taken, was published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1840–41. Professor F. N. Scott, who has made the essays of De Quincey available for students, estimates his contribution to literary art as follows: "He discovered capacities of prose, which, before his time, had not been known to exist; or if they existed in isolation, no one had before woven them together, and to weave together is, in art, to make a new thing. The quality which distinguishes De Quincey as a writer of prose is his ability to conceive, in language, a constructive whole of a musical order."

The text here followed is that edited by Professor Scott and published by Allyn and Bacon (Boston).

IT is a fault, amongst many faults, of such works as we have on this subject of style, that they collect the list of qualities, good or bad, to which composition is liable, not under any principle from which they might be deduced *a priori*, so as to be assured that all had been enumerated, but by a tentative groping, a mere conjectural estimate. The word *style* has with us a twofold meaning: one, the narrow meaning, expressing the mere *synthesis onomaton*, the syntaxis or combination of words into sentences; the other of far wider extent, and expressing all possible relations that can arise between thoughts and words — the total effect of a writer as derived from manner. Style may be viewed as an *organic* thing and as a *mechanic* thing. By organic, we mean that which, being acted upon, reacts, and which

propagates the communicated power without loss. By mechanic, that which, being impressed with motion, cannot throw it back without loss, and therefore soon comes to an end. The human body is an elaborate system of organs; it is sustained by organs. But the human body is exercised as a machine, and as such may be viewed in the arts of riding, dancing, leaping, &c., subject to the laws of motion and equilibrium. Now, the use of words is an organic thing, in so far as language is connected with thoughts, and modified by thoughts. It is a mechanic thing, in so far as words in combination determine or modify each other. The science of style as an organ of thought, of style in relation to the ideas and feelings, might be called the *organology* of style. The science of style considered as a machine, in which words act upon words, and through a particular grammar, might be called the *mechanology* of style. It is of little importance by what name these two functions of composition are expressed. But it is of great importance not to confound the functions: that function by which style maintains a commerce with thought, and that by which it chiefly communicates with grammar and with words. A pedant only will insist upon the names; but the distinction in the ideas, under some name, can be neglected only by the man who is careless of logic.

We know not how far we may be ever called upon to proceed with this discussion. If it should happen that we were, an interesting field of questions would lie before us for the first part (the organology). It would lead us over the ground trodden by the Greek and Roman rhetoricians, and over those particular questions which have arisen by the contrast between the circumstances of the ancients and our own since the origin of printing.

Punctuation,[1] trivial as such an innovation may seem, was the product of typography; and it is interesting to trace the effects upon style even of that one slight addition to the resources of logic. Previously a man was driven to depend for his security against misunderstanding upon the pure virtue of his syntax. Miscollocation or dislocation of related words disturbed the whole sense; its least effect was to give *no* sense — often gave it a dangerous sense. Now, punctuation was an artificial machinery for maintaining the integrity of the sense against all mistakes of the writer; and, as one consequence, it withdrew the energy of men's anxieties from the natural machinery, which lay in just and careful arrangement. Another and still greater machinery of art for the purpose of maintaining the sense, and with the effect of relaxing the care of the writer, lay in the exquisitely artificial structure of the Latin language, which by means of its terminal forms indicated the arrangement, and referred the proper predicate to the

[1] This is a most instructive fact; and it is another fact not less instructive that lawyers in most parts of Christendom, I believe, certainly wherever they are wide-awake professionally, tolerate no punctuation. But why? Are lawyers not sensible to the luminous effect from a point happily placed? Yes, they *are* sensible; but also they are sensible of the false prejudicating effect from a punctuation managed (as too generally it is) carelessly and illogically. Here is a brief abstract of the case. All punctuation narrows the path, which is else unlimited; and (*by* narrowing it) may chance to guide the reader into the right groove amongst several that are *not* right. But also punctuation has the effect very often (and almost always has the power) of biassing and predetermining the reader to an erroneous choice of meaning. Better, therefore, no guide at all than one which is likely enough to lead astray, and which must always be suspected and mistrusted, inasmuch as very nearly always it has the *power* to lead astray. — *Author.*

proper subject, spite of all that affectation or negligence could do to disturb the series of the logic or the succession of the syntax. Greek, of course, had the same advantage in kind, but not in degree; and thence rose some differences which have escaped all notice of rhetoricians. Here also would properly arise the question, started by Charles Fox (but probably due originally to the conversation of some far subtler friend, such as Edmund Burke), how far the practice of footnotes — a practice purely modern in its *form* — is reconcilable with the laws of just composition: and whether in virtue, though not in form, such footnotes did not exist for the ancients, by an evasion we could point out. The question is clearly one which grows out of style in its relations to thought: how far, viz., such an excrescence as a note argues that the sentence to which it is attached has not received the benefit of a full development for the conception involved; whether, if thrown into the furnace again and remelted, it might not be so recast as to absorb the redundancy which had previously flowed over into a note. Under this head would fall not only all the differential questions of style and composition between us and the ancients, but also the questions of merit as fairly distributed amongst the moderns compared with each other. The French, as we recently insisted, undoubtedly possess one vast advantage over all other nations in the good taste which governs the arrangement of their sentences; in the simplicity (a strange pretension to make for anything French) of the modulation under which their thoughts flow; in the absence of all cumbrous involution, and in the quick succession of their periods. In reality this invaluable merit tends to an excess; and the *style coupé* as opposed

to the *style soutenu*, flippancy opposed to solemnity, the subsultory to the continuous, these are the too frequent extremities to which the French manner betrays men. Better, however, to be flippant than by a revolting form of tumour and perplexity to lead men into habits of intellect such as result from the modern vice of English style. Still, with all its practical value, it is evident that the intellectual merits of the French style are but small. They are chiefly negative, in the first place; and, secondly, founded in the accident of their colloquial necessities. The law of conversation has prescribed the model of their sentences, and in that law there is quite as much of self-interest at work as of respect for equity. *Hanc veniam petimusque damusque vicissim.* Give and take is the rule; and he who expects to be heard must condescend to listen; which necessity for both parties binds over both to be brief. Brevity so won could at any rate have little merit, and it is certain that for profound thinking it must sometimes be a hindrance. In order to be brief a man must take a short sweep of view; his range of thought cannot be extensive; and such a rule, applied to a general method of thinking, is fitted rather to aphorisms and maxims, as upon a known subject, than to any process of investigation as upon a subject yet to be fathomed. Advancing still further into the examination of style as the organ of thinking, we should find occasion to see the prodigious defects of the French in all the higher qualities of prose composition. One advantage, for a practical purpose of life, is sadly counterbalanced by numerous faults, many of which are faults of stamina, lying not in any corrigible defects, but in such as imply penury of thinking from radical inaptitude in the thinking faculty to connect itself with the

feeling and with the creative faculty of the imagination. There are many other researches belonging to this subtlest of subjects, affecting both the logic and the ornaments of style, which would fall under the head of organology. But for instant practical use, though far less difficult for investigation, yet for that reason far more tangible and appreciable, would be all the suggestions proper to the other head of mechanology. Half a dozen rules for evading the most frequently recurring forms of awkwardness, of obscurity, of misproportion, and of double meaning, would do more to assist a writer in practice, laid under some necessity of hurry, than volumes of general disquisition. It makes us blush to add that even grammar is so little of a perfect attainment amongst us that, with two or three exceptions (one being Shakspere, whom some affect to consider as belonging to a semi-barbarous age), we have never seen the writer, through a circuit of prodigious reading, who has not sometimes violated the accidence or the syntax of English grammar.

Whatever becomes of our own possible speculations, we shall conclude with insisting on the growing necessity of style as a practical interest of daily life. Upon subjects of public concern, and in proportion to that concern, there will always be a suitable (and as letters extend, a growing) competition. Other things being equal, or appearing to be equal, the determining principle for the public choice will lie in the style. Of a German book, otherwise entitled to respect, it was said — *er lässt sich nicht lesen* — it does not permit itself to be read, such and so repulsive was the style. Among ourselves, this has long been true of newspapers. They do not suffer themselves to be read *in extenso*; and they are

read short, with what injury to the mind we have noticed. The same style of reading, once largely practised, is applied universally. To this special evil an improvement of style would apply a special redress. The same improvement is otherwise clamorously called for by each man's interest of competition. Public luxury, which is gradually consulted by everything else, must at length be consulted in style.

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ON STYLE[1]

ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

1788–1860

The Art of Literature, from which "On Style" is taken, is a volume of essays on literary subjects that Mr. T. Bailey Saunders translated (1891) from Schopenhauer's *Parerga* (1851). Schopenhauer's reputation as "one of the best of the few really excellent prose-writers of whom Germany can boast" makes his observations on writing particularly valuable.

STYLE is the physiognomy of the mind, and a safer index to character than the face. To imitate another man's style is like wearing a mask, which, be it never so fine, is not long in arousing disgust and abhorrence, because it is lifeless; so that even the ugliest living face is better. Hence those who write in Latin and copy the manner of ancient authors may be said to speak through a mask; the reader, it is true, hears what they say, but he cannot observe their physiognomy too; he cannot see their *style*. With the Latin works of writers who think for themselves the case is different, and their style is visible; writers, I mean, who have not condescended to any sort of imitation, such as Scotus Erigena, Petrarch, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, and many others. And affectation in style is like making grimaces. Further, the language in which a man writes is the physiognomy of the nation to which he belongs;

[1] Reprinted by permission of Mr. T. Bailey Saunders and his former publishers, Messrs. Swan, Sonnenschein and Company, Limited, London.

and here there are many hard and fast differences, beginning from the language of the Greeks, down to that of the Caribbean islanders.

To form a provisional estimate of the value of a writer's productions, it is not directly necessary to know the subject on which he has thought, or what it is that he has said about it; that would imply a perusal of all his works. It will be enough, in the main, to know *how* he has thought. This, which means the essential temper or general quality of his mind, may be precisely determined by his style. A man's style shows the *formal* nature of all his thoughts — the formal nature which can never change, be the subject or the character of his thoughts what it may: it is, as it were, the dough out of which all the contents of his mind are kneaded. When Eulenspiegel was asked how long it would take to walk to the next village, he gave the seemingly incongruous answer: *Walk.* He wanted to find out by the man's pace the distance he would cover in a given time. In the same way, when I have read a few pages of an author, I know fairly well how far he can bring me.

Every mediocre writer tries to mask his own natural style, because in his heart he knows the truth of what I am saying. He is thus forced, at the outset, to give up any attempt at being frank or naïve — a privilege which is thereby reserved for superior minds, conscious of their own worth, and therefore sure of themselves. What I mean is that these everyday writers are absolutely unable to resolve upon writing just as they think; because they have a notion that, were they to do so, their work might possibly look very childish and simple. For all that, it would not be without its value. If they would only go honestly to work, and say, quite simply,

the things they have really thought, and just as they have thought them, these writers would be readable and, within their own proper sphere, even instructive.

But instead of this, they try to make the reader believe that their thoughts have gone much further and deeper than is really the case. They say what they have to say in long sentences that wind about in a forced and unnatural way; they coin new words and write prolix periods which go round and round the thought and wrap it up in a sort of disguise. They tremble between the two separate aims of communicating what they want to say and of concealing it. Their object is to dress it up so that it may look learned or deep, in order to give people the impression that there is very much more in it than for the moment meets the eye. They either jot down their thoughts bit by bit, in short, ambiguous, and paradoxical sentences, which apparently mean much more than they say — of this kind of writing Schelling's treatises on natural philosophy are a splendid instance; or else they hold forth with a deluge of words and the most intolerable diffusiveness, as though no end of fuss were necessary to make the reader understand the deep meaning of their sentences, whereas it is some quite simple if not actually trivial idea — examples of which may be found in plenty in the popular works of Fichte, and the philosophical manuals of a hundred other miserable dunces not worth mentioning; or, again, they try to write in some particular style which they have been pleased to take up and think very grand, a style, for example, *par excellence* profound and scientific, where the reader is tormented to death by the narcotic effect of long-spun periods without a single idea in them, — such as are furnished in a special measure by those

most impudent of all mortals, the Hegelians;[1] or it may be that it is an intellectual style they have striven after, where it seems as though their object were to go crazy altogether; and so on in many other cases. All these endeavours to put off the *nascetur ridiculus mus* — to avoid showing the funny little creature that is born after such mighty throes — often make it difficult to know what it is that they really mean. And then, too, they write down words, nay, even whole sentences, without attaching any meaning to them themselves, but in the hope that someone else will get sense out of them.

And what is at the bottom of all this? Nothing but the untiring effort to sell words for thoughts; a mode of merchandise that is always trying to make fresh openings for itself, and by means of odd expressions, turns of phrase, and combinations of every sort, whether new or used in a new sense, to produce the appearance of intellect in order to make up for the very painfully felt lack of it.

It is amusing to see how writers with this object in view will attempt first one mannerism and then another, as though they were putting on the mask of intellect! This mask may possibly deceive the inexperienced for a while, until it is seen to be a dead thing, with no life in it at all: it is then laughed at and exchanged for another. Such an author will at one moment write in a dithyrambic vein, as though he were tipsy; at another, nay, on the very next page, he will be pompous, severe, profoundly learned and prolix, stumbling on in the most cumbrous way and chopping up everything very small;

[1] In their Hegel-gazette, commonly known as *Jahrbücher der wissenschaftlichen Literatur.*

like the late Christian Wolf, only in a modern dress. Longest of all lasts the mask of unintelligibility; but this is only in Germany, whither it was introduced by Fichte, perfected by Schelling, and carried to its highest pitch in Hegel — always with the best results.

And yet nothing is easier than to write so that no one can understand; just as, contrarily, nothing is more difficult than to express deep things in such a way that everyone must necessarily grasp them. All the arts and tricks I have been mentioning are rendered superfluous if the author really has any brains; for that allows him to show himself as he is, and confirms to all time Horace's maxim that good sense is the source and origin of good style: —

Scribendi recte sapere est et principium et fons.

But those authors I have named are like certain workers in metal, who try a hundred different compounds to take the place of gold — the only metal which can never have any substitute. Rather than do that, there is nothing against which a writer should be more upon his guard than the manifest endeavour to exhibit more intellect than he really has, because this makes the reader suspect that he possesses very little; since it is always the case that if a man affects anything, whatever it may be, it is just there that he is deficient.

That is why it is praise to an author to say that he is *naïve*; it means that he need not shrink from showing himself as he is. Generally speaking, to be naïve is to be attractive; while lack of naturalness is everywhere repulsive. As a matter of fact we find that every really great writer tries to express his thoughts as purely, clearly, definitely and shortly as possible. Simplicity

has always been held to be a mark of truth; it is also a mark of genius. Style receives its beauty from the thought it expresses; but with sham-thinkers the thoughts are supposed to be fine because of the style. Style is nothing but the mere silhouette of thought; and an obscure or bad style means a dull or confused brain.

The first rule, then, for a good style is that *the author should have something to say*; nay, this is in itself almost all that is necessary. Ah, how much it means! The neglect of this rule is a fundamental trait in the philosophical writing, and, in fact, in all the reflective literature, of my country, more especially since Fichte. These writers all let it be seen that they want to appear as though they had something to say; whereas they have nothing to say. Writing of this kind was brought in by the pseudo-philosophers at the Universities, and now it is current everywhere, even among the first literary notabilities of the age. It is the mother of that strained and vague style, where there seem to be two or even more meanings in the sentence; also of that prolix and cumbrous manner of expression, called *le stile empesé*; again, of that mere waste of words which consists in pouring them out like a flood; finally, of that trick of concealing the direst poverty of thought under a farrago of never-ending chatter, which clacks away like a windmill and quite stupefies one — stuff which a man may read for hours together without getting hold of a single clearly expressed and definite idea.[1] However, people are easy-going, and they have formed the habit

[1] Select examples of the art of writing in this style are to be found almost *passim* in the *Jahrbücher* published at Halle, afterwards called *Die deutschen Jahrbücher. — Translator.*

of reading page upon page of all sorts of such verbiage, without having any particular idea of what the author really means. They fancy it is all as it should be, and fail to discover that he is writing simply for writing's sake.

On the other hand, a good author, fertile in ideas, soon wins his reader's confidence that, when he writes, he has really and truly *something to say;* and this gives the intelligent reader patience to follow him with attention. Such an author, just because he really has something to say, will never fail to express himself in the simplest and most straightforward manner; because his object is to awake the very same thought in the reader that he has in himself, and no other. So he will be able to affirm with Boileau that his thoughts are everywhere open to the light of day, and that his verse always says something, whether it says it well or ill: —

Ma pensée au grand jour partout s'offre et s'expose,
Et mon vers, bien ou mal, dit toujours quelque chose:

while of the writers previously described it may be asserted, in the words of the same poet, that they talk much and never say anything at all — *qui parlant beaucoup ne disent jamais rien.*

Another characteristic of such writers is that they always avoid a positive assertion wherever they can possibly do so, in order to leave a loophole for escape in case of need. Hence they never fail to choose the more *abstract* way of expressing themselves; whereas intelligent people use the more *concrete;* because the latter brings things more within the range of actual demonstration, which is the source of all evidence.

There are many examples proving this preference for abstract expression; and a particularly ridiculous one is

afforded by the use of the verb *to condition* in the sense of *to cause* or *to produce*. People say *to condition something* instead of *to cause it*, because being abstract and indefinite it says less; it affirms that *A* cannot happen without *B*, instead of that *A* is caused by *B*. A back door is always left open; and this suits people whose secret knowledge of their own incapacity inspires them with a perpetual terror of all positive assertion; while with other people it is merely the effect of that tendency by which everything that is stupid in literature or bad in life is immediately imitated — a fact proved in either case by the rapid way in which it spreads. The Englishman uses his own judgment in what he writes as well as in what he does; but there is no nation of which this eulogy is less true than of the Germans. The consequence of this state of things is that the word *cause* has of late almost disappeared from the language of literature, and people talk only of *condition*. The fact is worth mentioning because it is so characteristically ridiculous.

The very fact that these commonplace authors are never more than half-conscious when they write, would be enough to account for their dulness of mind and the tedious things they produce. I say they are only half-conscious, because they really do not themselves understand the meaning of the words they use: they take words ready-made and commit them to memory. Hence when they write, it is not so much words as whole phrases that they put together — *phrases banales*. This is the explanation of that palpable lack of clearly expressed thought in what they say. The fact is that they do not possess the die to give this stamp to their writing; clear thought of their own is just what they

have not got. And what do we find in its place? — a vague, enigmatical intermixture of words, current phrases, hackneyed terms and fashionable expressions. The result is that the foggy stuff they write is like a page printed with very old type.

On the other hand, an intelligent author really speaks to us when he writes, and that is why he is able to rouse our interest and commune with us. It is the intelligent author alone who puts individual words together with a full consciousness of their meaning, and chooses them with deliberate design. Consequently, his discourse stands to that of the writer described above, much as a picture that has been really painted to one that has been produced by the use of a stencil. In the one case, every word, every touch of the brush, has a special purpose; in the other, all is done mechanically. The same distinction may be observed in music. For just as Lichtenberg says that Garrick's soul seemed to be in every muscle in his body, so it is the omnipresence of intellect that always and everywhere characterises the work of genius.

I have alluded to the tediousness which marks the works of these writers; and in this connection it is to be observed, generally, that tediousness is of two kinds: objective and subjective. A work is objectively tedious when it contains the defect in question; that is to say, when its author has no perfectly clear thought or knowledge to communicate. For if a man has any clear thought or knowledge in him, his aim will be to communicate it, and he will direct his energies to this end; so that the ideas he furnishes are everywhere clearly expressed. The result is that he is neither diffuse, nor unmeaning, nor confused, and consequently not tedious.

In such a case, even though the author is at bottom in error, the error is at any rate clearly worked out and well thought over, so that it is at least formally correct; and thus some value always attaches to the work. But for the same reason a work that is objectively tedious is at all times devoid of any value whatever.

The other kind of tediousness is only relative: a reader may find a work dull because he has no interest in the question treated of in it, and this means that his intellect is restricted. The best work may, therefore, be tedious subjectively, tedious, I mean, to this or that particular person; just as, contrarily, the worst work may be subjectively engrossing to this or that particular person who has an interest in the question treated of, or in the writer of the book.

It would generally serve writers in good stead if they would see that, whilst a man should, if possible, think like a great genius, he should talk the same language as everyone else. Authors should use common words to say uncommon things. But they do just the opposite. We find them trying to wrap up trivial ideas in grand words, and to clothe their very ordinary thoughts in the most extraordinary phrases, the most far-fetched, unnatural, and out-of-the-way expressions. Their sentences perpetually stalk about on stilts. They take so much pleasure in bombast, and write in such a high-flown, bloated, affected, hyperbolical and aerobatic style that their prototype is Ancient Pistol, whom his friend Falstaff once impatiently told to say what he had to say *like a man of this world*.[1]

[1] *King Henry IV*, Part II, Act v, Sc. 3.

There is no expression in any other language exactly answering to the French *stile empesé*; but the thing itself exists all the more often. When associated with affectation, it is in literature what assumption of dignity, grand airs and primness are in society; and equally intolerable. Dulness of mind is fond of donning this dress; just as in ordinary life it is stupid people who like being demure and formal.

An author who writes in the prim style resembles a man who dresses himself up in order to avoid being confounded or put on the same level with the mob — a risk never run by the *gentleman*, even in his worst clothes. The plebeian may be known by a certain showiness of attire and a wish to have everything spick and span; and, in the same way, the commonplace person is betrayed by his style.

Nevertheless, an author follows a false aim if he tries to write exactly as he speaks. There is no style of writing but should have a certain trace of kinship with the *epigraphic* or *monumental* style, which is, indeed, the ancestor of all styles. For an author to write as he speaks is just as reprehensible as the opposite fault, to speak as he writes; for this gives a pedantic effect to what he says, and at the same time makes him hardly intelligible.

An obscure and vague manner of expression is always and everywhere a very bad sign. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred it comes from vagueness of thought; and this again almost always means that there is something radically wrong and incongruous about the thought itself — in a word, that it is incorrect. When a right thought springs up in the mind, it strives after expression and is not long in reaching it; for clear

thought easily finds words to fit it. If a man is capable of thinking anything at all, he is also always able to express it in clear, intelligible, and unambiguous terms. Those writers who construct difficult, obscure, involved, and equivocal sentences, most certainly do not know aright what it is that they want to say: they have only a dull consciousness of it, which is still in the stage of struggle to shape itself as thought. Often, indeed, their desire is to conceal from themselves and others that they really have nothing at all to say. They wish to appear to know what they do not know, to think what they do not think, to say what they do not say. If a man has some real communication to make, which will he choose — an indistinct or a clear way of expressing himself? Even Quintilian remarks that things which are said by a highly educated man are often easier to understand and much clearer; and that the less educated a man is, the more obscurely he will write — *plerumque accidit ut faciliora sint ad intelligendum et lucidiora multo quæ a doctissimo quoque dicuntur. . . . Erit ergo etiam obscurior quo quisque deterior.*

An author should avoid enigmatical phrases; he should know whether he wants to say a thing or does not want to say it. It is this indecision of style that makes so many writers insipid. The only case that offers an exception to this rule arises when it is necessary to make a remark that is in some way improper.

As exaggeration generally produces an effect the opposite of that aimed at; so words, it is true, serve to make thought intelligible — but only up to a certain point. If words are heaped up beyond it, the thought becomes more and more obscure again. To find where the point lies is the problem of style, and the business

of the critical faculty; for a word too much always defeats its purpose. This is what Voltaire means when he says that *the adjective is the enemy of the substantive*. But, as we have seen, many people try to conceal their poverty of thought under a flood of verbiage.

Accordingly, let all redundancy be avoided, all stringing together of remarks which have no meaning and are not worth perusal. A writer must make a sparing use of the reader's time, patience and attention; so as to lead him to believe that his author writes what is worth careful study, and will reward the time spent upon it. It is always better to omit something good than to add that which is not worth saying at all. This is the right application of Hesiod's maxim, πλέον ἥμισυ πάντος [1] — the half is more than the whole. *Le secret pour être ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire*. Therefore, if possible, the quintessence only! mere leading thoughts! nothing that the reader would think for himself. To use many words to communicate few thoughts is everywhere the unmistakable sign of mediocrity. To gather much thought into few words stamps the man of genius.

Truth is most beautiful undraped; and the impression it makes is deep in proportion as its expression has been simple. This is so, partly because it then takes unobstructed possession of the hearer's whole soul, and leaves him no by-thought to distract him; partly, also, because he feels that here he is not being corrupted or cheated by the arts of rhetoric, but that all the effect of what is said comes from the thing itself. For instance, what declamation on the vanity of human existence could ever be more telling than the words of Job? — *Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live*

[1] *Works and Days*, 40.

and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay.

For the same reason Goethe's naïve poetry is incomparably greater than Schiller's rhetoric. It is this, again, that makes many popular songs so affecting. As in architecture an excess of decoration is to be avoided, so in the art of literature a writer must guard against all rhetorical finery, all useless amplification, and all superfluity of expression in general; in a word, he must strive after *chastity* of style. Every word that can be spared is hurtful if it remains. The law of simplicity and naïveté holds good of all fine art; for it is quite possible to be at once simple and sublime.

True brevity of expression consists in everywhere saying only what is worth saying, and in avoiding tedious detail about things which everyone can supply for himself. This involves correct discrimination between what is necessary and what is superfluous. A writer should never be brief at the expense of being clear, to say nothing of being grammatical. It shows lamentable want of judgment to weaken the expression of a thought, or to stunt the meaning of a period for the sake of using a few words less. But this is the precise endeavour of that false brevity nowadays so much in vogue, which proceeds by leaving out useful words and even by sacrificing grammar and logic. It is not only that such writers spare a word by making a single verb or adjective do duty for several different periods, so that the reader, as it were, has to grope his way through them in the dark; they also practise, in many other respects, an unseemly economy of speech, in the effort to effect what they foolishly take to be brevity of expres-

sion and conciseness of style. By omitting something that might have thrown a light over the whole sentence, they turn it into a conundrum, which the reader tries to solve by going over it again and again.[1]

It is wealth and weight of thought, and nothing else, that gives brevity to style, and makes it concise and pregnant. If a writer's ideas are important, luminous, and generally worth communicating, they will necessarily furnish matter and substance enough to fill out the periods which give them expression, and make these in all their parts both grammatically and verbally complete; and so much will this be the case that no one will ever find them hollow, empty or feeble. The diction will everywhere be brief and pregnant, and allow the thought to find intelligible and easy expression, and even unfold and move about with grace.

Therefore instead of contracting his words and forms of speech, let a writer enlarge his thoughts. If a man has been thinned by illness and finds his clothes too big, it is not by cutting them down, but by recovering his usual bodily condition, that he ought to make them fit him again.

Let me here mention an error of style very prevalent nowadays, and, in the degraded state of literature and the neglect of ancient languages, always on the increase;

[1] In the original, Schopenhauer here enters upon a lengthy examination of certain common errors in the writing and speaking of German. His remarks are addressed to his own countrymen, and would lose all point, even if they were intelligible, in an English translation. But for those who practise their German by conversing or corresponding with Germans, let me recommend what he there says as a useful corrective to a slipshod style, such as can easily be contracted if it is assumed that the natives of a country always know their own language perfectly. — *Translator.*

I mean *subjectivity*. A writer commits this error when he thinks it enough if he himself knows what he means and wants to say, and takes no thought for the reader, who is left to get at the bottom of it as best he can. This is as though the author were holding a monologue; whereas it ought to be a dialogue; and a dialogue, too, in which he must express himself all the more clearly inasmuch as he cannot hear the questions of his interlocutor.

Style should for this very reason never be subjective, but *objective*; and it will not be objective unless the words are so set down that they directly force the reader to think precisely the same thing as the author thought when he wrote them. Nor will this result be obtained unless the author has always been careful to remember that thought so far follows the law of gravity that it travels from head to paper much more easily than from paper to head; so that he must assist the latter passage by every means in his power. If he does this, a writer's words will have a purely objective effect, like that of a finished picture in oils; whilst the subjective style is not much more certain in its working than spots on the wall, which look like figures only to one whose phantasy has been accidentally aroused by them; other people see nothing but spots and blurs. The difference in question applies to literary method as a whole; but it is often established also in particular instances. For example, in a recently published work I found the following sentence: *I have not written in order to increase the number of existing books*. This means just the opposite of what the writer wanted to say, and is nonsense as well.

He who writes carelessly confesses thereby at the very outset that he does not attach much importance to his

own thoughts. For it is only where a man is convinced of the truth and importance of his thoughts, that he feels the enthusiasm necessary for an untiring and assiduous effort to find the clearest, finest, and strongest expression for them — just as for sacred relics of priceless works of art there are provided silvern or golden receptacles. It was this feeling that led ancient authors, whose thoughts, expressed in their own words, have lived thousands of years, and therefore bear the honoured title of *classics*, always to write with care. Plato, indeed, is said to have written the introduction to his *Republic* seven times over in different ways.[1]

As neglect of dress betrays want of respect for the company a man meets, so a hasty, careless, bad style shows an outrageous lack of regard for the reader, who then rightly punishes it by refusing to read the book. It is especially amusing to see reviewers criticising the works of others in their own most careless style — the style of a hireling. It is as if a judge were to come into court in dressing-gown and slippers! If I see a man badly and dirtily dressed, I feel some hesitation, at first, in entering into conversation with him: and when, on taking up a book, I am struck at once by the negligence of its style, I put it away.

Good writing should be governed by the rule that a man can think only one thing clearly at a time; and, therefore, that he should not be expected to think two or even more things in one and the same moment. But this is what is done when a writer breaks up his principal sentence into little pieces, for the purpose of push-

[1] It is a fact worth mentioning that the first twelve words of the *Republic* are placed in the exact order which would be natural in English. — *Translator.*

ing into the gaps thus made two or three other thoughts by way of parenthesis; thereby unnecessarily and wantonly confusing the reader. And here it is again my own countrymen who are chiefly in fault. That German lends itself to this way of writing, makes the thing possible, but does not justify it. No prose reads more easily or pleasantly than French, because, as a rule, it is free from the error in question. The Frenchman strings his thoughts together, as far as he can, in the most logical and natural order, and so lays them before his reader one after the other for convenient deliberation, so that every one of them may receive undivided attention. The German, on the other hand, weaves them together into a sentence which he twists and crosses, and crosses and twists again; because he wants to say six things all at once, instead of advancing them one by one. His aim should be to attract and hold the reader's attention; but, above and beyond neglect of this aim, he demands from the reader that he shall set the above-mentioned rule at defiance, and think three or four different thoughts at one and the same time; or, since that is impossible, that his thoughts shall succeed each other as quickly as the vibrations of a chord. In this way an author lays the foundation of his *stile empesé*, which is then carried to perfection by the use of high-flown, pompous expressions to communicate the simplest things, and other artifices of the same kind.

In those long sentences rich in involved parentheses, like a box of boxes one within another, and padded out like roast geese stuffed with apples, it is really the *memory* that is chiefly taxed; while it is the understanding and the judgment which should be called into play, instead of having their activity thereby actually hin-

dered and weakened.[1] This kind of sentence furnishes the reader with mere half-phrases, which he is then called upon to collect carefully and store up in his memory, as though they were the pieces of a torn letter, afterwards to be completed and made sense of by the other halves to which they respectively belong. He is expected to go on reading for a little without exercising any thought, nay, exerting only his memory, in the hope that, when he comes to the end of the sentence, he may see its meaning and so receive something to think about; and he is thus given a great deal to learn by heart before obtaining anything to understand. This is manifestly wrong and an abuse of the reader's patience.

The ordinary writer has an unmistakable preference for this style, because it causes the reader to spend time and trouble in understanding that which he would have understood in a moment without it; and this makes it look as though the writer had more depth and intelligence than the reader. This is, indeed, one of those artifices referred to above, by means of which mediocre authors unconsciously, and as it were by instinct, strive to conceal their poverty of thought and give an appearance of the opposite. Their ingenuity in this respect is really astounding.

It is manifestly against all sound reason to put one thought obliquely on top of another, as though both together formed a wooden cross. But this is what is done where a writer interrupts what he has begun to say, for the purpose of inserting some quite alien mat-

[1] This sentence in the original is obviously meant to illustrate the fault of which it speaks. It does so by the use of a construction very common in German, but happily unknown in English; where, however, the fault itself exists none the less, though in a different form. — *Translator.*

ter; thus depositing with the reader a meaningless half-sentence, and bidding him keep it until the completion comes. It is much as though a man were to treat his guests by handing them an empty plate, in the hope of something appearing upon it. And commas used for a similar purpose belong to the same family as notes at the foot of the page and parentheses in the middle of the text; nay, all three differ only in degree. If Demosthenes and Cicero occasionally inserted words by way of parenthesis, they would have done better to have refrained.

But this style of writing becomes the height of absurdity when the parentheses are not even fitted into the frame of the sentence, but wedged in so as directly to shatter it. If, for instance, it is an impertinent thing to interrupt another person when he is speaking, it is no less impertinent to interrupt oneself. But all bad, careless, and hasty authors, who scribble with the bread actually before their eyes, use this style of writing six times on a page, and rejoice in it. It consists in — it is advisable to give rule and example together, wherever it is possible — breaking up one phrase in order to glue in another. Nor is it merely out of laziness that they write thus. They do it out of stupidity; they think there is a charming *légèreté* about it; that it gives life to what they say. No doubt there are a few rare cases where such a form of sentence may be pardonable.

Few write in the way in which an architect builds; who, before he sets to work, sketches out his plan, and thinks it over down to its smallest details. Nay, most people write only as though they were playing dominoes; and as in this game the pieces are arranged half by design, half by chance, so it is with the sequence and

connection of their sentences. They only just have an idea of what the general shape of their work will be, and of the aim they set before themselves. Many are ignorant even of this, and write as the coral-insects build; period joins to period, and Lord knows what the author means.

Life nowadays goes at a gallop; and the way in which this affects literature is to make it extremely superficial and slovenly.

ON FAMILIAR STYLE

WILLIAM HAZLITT

1778–1830

In the *advertisement* of the Paris edition of *Table-Talk*, Hazlitt offers this explanation of his own style: "It therefore occurred to me as possible to combine the advantages of these two styles, the *literary* and the *conversational;* or after stating and enforcing some leading idea, to follow it up by such observations and reflections as would probably suggest themselves in discussing the same question in company with others. This seemed to me to promise a greater variety and richness, and perhaps a greater sincerity, than could be attained by a more precise and scholastic method. The same consideration had an influence on the familiarity and conversational idiom of the style I have used. How far the plan was feasible, or how far I have succeeded in the execution of it must be left to others to decide. I am also afraid of having too frequently attempted to give a popular air and effect to subtle distinctions and trains of thought; so that I shall be considered as too metaphysical by the careless reader, while by the more severe and scrupulous inquirer my style will be complained of as too light and desultory. To all this I can only answer that I have done not what I wished, but the best I could do; and I heartily wish it had been better."

Few English writers are entitled to speak with greater authority on the style that combines the advantages of the "literary" and the "conversational."

IT is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may so say, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of. It utterly rejects not only

all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, *slipshod* allusions. It is not to take the first word that offers, but the best word in common use; it is not to throw words together in any combinations we please, but to follow and avail ourselves of the true idiom of the language. To write a genuine familiar or truly English style, is to write as any one would speak in common conversation, who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes. Or to give another illustration, to write naturally is the same thing in regard to common conversation, as to read naturally is in regard to common speech. It does not follow that it is an easy thing to give the true accent and inflection to the words you utter, because you do not attempt to rise above the level of ordinary life and colloquial speaking. You do not assume indeed the solemnity of the pulpit, or the tone of stage-declamation: neither are you at liberty to gabble on at a venture, without emphasis or discretion, or to resort to vulgar dialect or clownish pronunciation. You must steer a middle course. You are tied down to a given and appropriate articulation, which is determined by the habitual associations between sense and sound, and which you can only hit by entering into the author's meaning, as you must find the proper words and style to express yourself by fixing your thoughts on the subject you have to write about. Any one may mouth out a passage with a theatrical cadence, or get upon stilts to tell his thoughts: but to write or speak with propriety and simplicity is a more difficult task. Thus it is easy to affect a pompous style, to use a word twice as big as the thing you want to ex-

press: it is not so easy to pitch upon the very word that exactly fits it. Out of eight or ten words equally common, equally intelligible, with nearly equal pretensions, it is a matter of some nicety and discrimination to pick out the very one, the preferableness of which is scarcely perceptible, but decisive. The reason why I object to Dr. Johnson's style is, that there is no discrimination, no selection, no variety in it. He uses none but "tall, opaque words," taken from the "first row of the rubric": — words with the greatest number of syllables, or Latin phrases with merely English terminations. If a fine style depended on this sort of arbitrary pretension, it would be fair to judge of an author's elegance by the measurement of his words, and the substitution of foreign circumlocutions (with no precise associations) for the mother-tongue.[1] How simple is it to be dignified without ease, to be pompous without meaning! Surely, it is but a mechanical rule for avoiding what is low to be always pedantic and affected. It is clear you cannot use a vulgar English word, if you never use a common English word at all. A fine tact is shewn in adhering to those which are perfectly common, and yet never falling into any expressions which are debased by disgusting circumstances, or which owe their signification and point to technical or professional allusions. A truly natural or familiar style can never be quaint or vulgar, for this reason, that it is of universal force and applicability, and that quaintness and vulgarity arise out of the immediate connection of certain words with coarse and dis-

[1] I have heard of such a thing as an author, who makes it a rule never to admit a monosyllable into his vapid verse. Yet the charm and sweetness of Marlowe's lines depended often on their being made up almost entirely of monosyllables. — *Author.*

agreeable, or with confined ideas. The last form what we understand by *cant* or *slang* phrases. — To give an example of what is not very clear in the general statement. I should say that the phrase *To cut with a knife*, or *To cut a piece of wood*, is perfectly free from vulgarity, because it is perfectly common: but to *cut an acquaintance* is not quite unexceptionable, because it is not perfectly common or intelligible, and has hardly yet escaped out of the limits of slang phraseology. I should hardly therefore use the word in this sense without putting it in italics as a license of expression, to be received *cum grano salis*. All provincial or bye-phrases come under the same mark of reprobation — all such as the writer transfers to the page from his fire-side or a particular *coterie*, or that he invents for his own sole use and convenience. I conceive that words are like money, not the worse for being common, but that it is the stamp of custom alone that gives them circulation or value. I am fastidious in this respect, and would almost as soon coin the currency of the realm as counterfeit the King's English. I never invented or gave a new and unauthorised meaning to any word but one single one (the term *impersonal* applied to feelings) and that was in an abstruse metaphysical discussion to express a very difficult distinction. I have been (I know) loudly accused of revelling in vulgarisms and broken English. I cannot speak to that point: but so far I plead guilty to the determined use of acknowledged idioms and common elliptical expressions. I am not sure that the critics in question know the one from the other, that is, can distinguish any medium between formal pedantry and the most barbarous solecism. As an author, I endeavour to employ plain words and popular modes of

construction, as were I a chapman and dealer, I should common weights and measures.

The proper force of words lies not in the words themselves, but in their application. A word may be a fine-sounding word, of an unusual length, and very imposing from its learning and novelty, and yet in the connection in which it is introduced, may be quite pointless and irrelevant. It is not pomp or pretension, but the adaptation of the expression to the idea that clenches a writer's meaning: — as it is not the size or glossiness of the materials, but their being fitted each to its place, that gives strength to the arch; or as the pegs and nails are as necessary to the support of the building as the larger timbers, and more so than the mere shewy, unsubstantial ornaments. I hate any thing that occupies more space than it is worth. I hate to see a load of band-boxes go along the street, and I hate to see a parcel of big words without any thing in them. A person who does not deliberately dispose of all his thoughts alike in cumbrous draperies and flimsy disguises, may strike out twenty varieties of familiar every-day language, each coming somewhat nearer to the feeling he wants to convey, and at last not hit upon that particular and only one, which may be said to be identical with the exact impression in his mind. This would seem to shew that Mr. Cobbett is hardly right in saying that the first word that occurs is always the best. It may be a very good one; and yet a better may present itself on reflection or from time to time. It should be suggested naturally, however, and spontaneously, from a fresh and lively conception of the subject. We seldom succeed by trying at improvement, or by merely substituting one word for another that we are not satisfied with, as we

cannot recollect the name of a place or person by merely plaguing ourselves about it. We wander farther from the point by persisting in a wrong scent; but it starts up accidentally in the memory when we least expected it, by touching some link in the chain of previous association.

There are those who hoard up and make a cautious display of nothing but rich and rare phraseology; — ancient medals, obscure coins, and Spanish pieces of eight. They are very curious to inspect; but I myself would neither offer nor take them in the course of exchange. A sprinkling of archaisms is not amiss; but a tissue of obsolete expressions is more fit *for keep than wear*. I do not say I would not use any phrase that had been brought into fashion before the middle or the end of the last century; but I should be shy of using any that had not been employed by any approved author during the whole of that time. Words, like clothes, get old-fashioned, or mean and ridiculous, when they have been for some time laid aside. Mr. Lamb is the only imitator of old English style I can read with pleasure; and he is so thoroughly imbued with the spirit of his authors, that the idea of imitation is almost done away. There is an inward unction, a marrowy vein both in the thought and feeling, an intuition, deep and lively, of his subject, that carries off any quaintness or awkwardness arising from an antiquated style and dress. The matter is completely his own, though the manner is assumed. Perhaps his ideas are altogether so marked and individual, as to require their point and pungency to be neutralised by the affectation of a singular but traditional form of conveyance. Tricked out in the prevailing costume, they would probably seem more startling and out of the way. The old English authors, Burton, Ful-

ler, Coryate, Sir Thomas Browne, are a kind of mediators between us and the more eccentric and whimsical modern, reconciling us to his peculiarities. I do not however know how far this is the case or not, till he condescends to write like one of us. I must confess that what I like best of his papers under the signature of Elia (still I do not presume, amidst such excellence, to decide what is most excellent) is the account of *Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist*, which is also the most free from obsolete allusions and turns of expression —

"A well of native English undefiled."

To those acquainted with his admired prototypes, these Essays of the ingenious and highly gifted author have the same sort of charm and relish, that Erasmus's Colloquies or a fine piece of modern Latin have to the classical scholar. Certainly, I do not know any borrowed pencil that has more power or felicity of execution than the one of which I have here been speaking.

It is as easy to write a gaudy style without ideas, as it is to spread a pallet of shewy colours, or to smear in a flaunting transparency. "What do you read?" — "Words, words, words." — "What is the matter?" — "*Nothing*," it might be answered. The florid style is the reverse of the familiar. The last is employed as an unvarnished medium to convey ideas; the first is resorted to as a spangled veil to conceal the want of them. When there is nothing to be set down but words, it costs little to have them fine. Look through the dictionary, and cull out a *florilegium*, rival the *tulippomania*. *Rouge* high enough, and never mind the natural complexion. The vulgar, who are not in the secret, will admire the look of preternatural health and vigour; and

the fashionable, who regard only appearances, will be delighted with the imposition. Keep to your sounding generalities, your tinkling phrases, and all will be well. Swell out an unmeaning truism to a perfect tympany of style. A thought, a distinction is the rock on which all this brittle cargo of verbiage splits at once. Such writers have merely *verbal* imaginations, that retain nothing but words. Or their puny thoughts have dragon-wings, all green and gold. They soar far above the vulgar failing of the *Sermo humi obrepens* — their most ordinary speech is never short of an hyperbole, splendid, imposing, vague, incomprehensible, magniloquent, a cento of sounding commonplaces. If some of us, whose "ambition is more lowly," pry a little too narrowly into nooks and corners to pick up a number of "unconsidered trifles," they never once direct their eyes or lift their hands to seize on any but the most gorgeous, tarnished, thread-bare patch-work set of phrases, the left-off finery of poetic extravagance, transmitted down through successive generations of barren pretenders. If they criticise actors and actresses, a huddled phantasmagoria of feathers, spangles, floods of light, and oceans of sound float before their morbid sense, which they paint in the style of Ancient Pistol. Not a glimpse can you get of the merits or defects of the performers: they are hidden in a profusion of barbarous epithets and wilful rhodomontade. Our hypercritics are not thinking of these little fantoccini beings —

"That strut and fret their hour upon the stage" —

but of tall phantoms of words, abstractions, *genera* and *species*, sweeping clauses, periods that unite the Poles, forced alliterations, astounding antitheses —

"And on their pens *Fustian* sits plumed."

If they describe kings and queens, it is an Eastern pageant. The Coronation at either House is nothing to it. We get at four repeated images — a curtain, a throne, a sceptre, and a foot-stool. These are with them the wardrobe of a lofty imagination; and they turn their servile strains to servile uses. Do we read a description of pictures? It is not a reflection of tones and hues which "nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on," but piles of precious stones, rubies, pearls, emeralds, Golconda's mines, and all the blazonry of art. Such persons are in fact besotted with words, and their brains are turned with the glittering, but empty and sterile phantoms of things. Personifications, capital letters, seas of sunbeams, visions of glory, shining inscriptions, the figures of a transparency, Britannia with her shield, or Hope leaning on an anchor, make up their stock in trade. They may be considered as *hieroglyphical* writers. Images stand out in their minds isolated and important merely in themselves, without any ground-word of feeling — there is no context in their imaginations. Words affect them in the same way, by the mere sound, that is, by their possible, not by their actual application to the subject in hand. They are fascinated by first appearances, and have no sense of consequences. Nothing more is meant by them than meets the ear: they understand or feel nothing more than meets their eye. The web and texture of the universe, and of the heart of man, is a mystery to them: they have no faculty that strikes a chord in unison with it. They cannot get beyond the daubings of fancy, the varnish of sentiment. Objects are not linked to feelings, words to things, but images revolve in splendid mockery, words represent themselves in their strange

rhapsodies. The categories of such a mind are pride and ignorance — pride in outside show, to which they sacrifice every thing, and ignorance of the true worth and hidden structure both of words and things. With a sovereign contempt for what is familiar and natural, they are the slaves of vulgar affectation — of a routine of high-flown phrases. Scorning to imitate realities, they are unable to invent any thing, to strike out one original idea. They are not copyists of nature, it is true: but they are the poorest of all plagiarists, the plagiarists of words. All is far-fetched, dear-bought, artificial, oriental in subject and allusion: all is mechanical, conventional, vapid, formal, pedantic in style and execution. They startle and confound the understanding of the reader, by the remoteness and obscurity of their illustrations: they soothe the ear by the monotony of the same everlasting round of circuitous metaphors. They are the *mock-school* in poetry and prose. They flounder about between fustian in expression, and bathos in sentiment. They tantalise the fancy, but never reach the head nor touch the heart. Their Temple of Fame is like a shadowy structure raised by Dulness to Vanity, or like Cowper's description of the Empress of Russia's palace of ice, as "worthless as in shew 'twas glittering" —

"It smiled, and it was cold!"

ON STYLE[1]

ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

1863–

"On Style" is one of a series of lectures delivered at the University of Cambridge in 1913–1914. These were later published as a volume entitled *On the Art of Writing*. The author has told his readers that he preferred to leave the lectures virtually as he delivered them rather than to work them over into "a smooth treatise." . . . "they will be truer to life; and so may experimentally enforce their preaching, that the Art of Writing is a living business."

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch is one of the relatively few novelists who have been called to university chairs of English.

SHOULD Providence, Gentlemen, destine any one of you to write books for his living, he will find experimentally true what I here promise him, that few pleasures sooner cloy than reading what the reviewers say. This promise I hand on with the better confidence since it was endorsed for me once in conversation by that eminently good man the late Henry Sidgwick; who added, however, "Perhaps I ought to make a single exception. There was a critic who called one of my books 'epoch-making.' Being anonymous, he would have been hard to find and thank, perhaps; but I ought to have made the effort."

May I follow up this experience of his with one of my own, as a preface or brief apology for this lecture? Short-lived as is the author's joy in his critics, far-spent as may be his hope of fame, mournful his consent with

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Sir Thomas Browne that "there is nothing immortal but immortality," he cannot hide from certain sanguine men of business, who in England call themselves "Press-Cutting Agencies," in America "Press-Clipping Bureaus," and, as each successive child of his invention comes to birth, unbecomingly presume in him an almost virginal trepidation. "Your book," they write falsely, "is exciting much comment. May we collect and send you notices of it appearing in the World's Press? We submit a specimen cutting with our terms; and are, dear Sir," etc.

Now, although steadily unresponsive to this wile, I am sometimes guilty of taking the enclosed specimen review and thrusting it for preservation among the scarcely less deciduous leaves of the book it was written to appraise. So it happened that having this vacation, to dust — not to read — a line of obsolete or obsolescent works on a shelf, I happened on a review signed by no smaller a man than Mr. Gilbert Chesterton and informing the world that the author of my obsolete book was full of good stories as a kindly uncle, but had a careless or impatient way of stopping short and leaving his readers to guess what they most wanted to know: that, reaching the last chapter, or what he chose to make the last chapter, instead of winding up and telling "how everybody lived ever after," he (so to speak) slid you off his avuncular knee with a blessing and the remark that nine o'clock was striking and all good children should be in their beds.

That criticism has haunted me during the vacation. Looking back on a course of lectures which I deemed to be accomplished; correcting them in print; revising them with all the nervousness of a beginner; I have

seemed to hear you complain — "He has exhorted us to write accurately, appropriately; to eschew Jargon; to be bold and essay Verse. He has insisted that Literature is a living art, to be practised. But just what we most needed he has not told. At the final doorway to the secret he turned his back and left us. Accuracy, propriety, perspicuity — these we may achieve. But where has he helped us to write with beauty, with charm, with distinction? Where has he given us rules for what is called *Style* in short? — having attained which an author may count himself set up in business."

Thus, Gentlemen, with my mind's ear I heard you reproaching me. I beg you to accept what follows for my apology.

To begin with, let me plead that you have been told of one or two things which Style is *not;* which have little or nothing to do with Style, though sometimes vulgarly mistaken for it. Style, for example, is not — can never be — extraneous Ornament. You remember, may be, the Persian lover whom I quoted to you out of Newman: how to convey his passion he sought a professional letter-writer and purchased a vocabulary charged with ornament, wherewith to attract the fair one as with a basket of jewels. Well, in this extraneous, professional, purchased ornamentation, you have something which Style *is not*: and if you here require a practical rule of me, I will present you with this: "Whenever you feel an impulse to perpetrate a piece of exceptionally fine writing, obey it — whole-heartedly — and delete it before sending your manuscript to press. *Murder your darlings.*"

But let me plead further that you have not been left altogether without clue to the secret of what Style *is.*

That you must master the secret for yourselves lay implicit in our bargain, and you were never promised that a writer's training would be easy. Yet a clue was certainly put in your hands when, having insisted that Literature is a living art, I added that therefore it must be personal and of its essence personal.

This goes very deep: it conditions all our criticism of art. Yet it conceals no mystery. You may see its meaning most easily and clearly, perhaps, by contrasting Science and Art at their two extremes — say Pure Mathematics with Acting. Science as a rule deals with things, Art with man's thought and emotion about things. In Pure Mathematics things are rarefied into ideas, numbers, concepts, but still farther and farther away from the individual man. Two and two make four, and fourpence is not ninepence (or at any rate four is not nine) whether Alcibiades or Cleon keep the tally. In Acting on the other hand almost everything depends on personal interpretation — on the gesture, the walk, the gaze, the tone of a Siddons, the *rusé* smile of a Coquelin, the exquisite, vibrant intonation of a Bernhardt. "English Art?" exclaimed Whistler, "there is no such thing! Art is art and mathematics is mathematics." Whistler erred. Precisely because Art is Art, and Mathematics is Mathematics and a Science, Art being Art can be English or French; and, more than this, must be the personal expression of an Englishman or a Frenchman, as a "Constable" differs from a "Corot" and a "Whistler" from both. Surely I need not labour this. But what is true of the extremes of Art and Science is true also, though sometimes less recognisably true, of the mean: and where they meet and seem to conflict (as in History) the impact is that of the per-

sonal or individual mind upon universal truth, and the question becomes whether what happened in the Sicilian Expedition, or at the trial of Charles I, can be set forth naked as an algebraical sum, serene in its certainty, indifferent to opinion, uncoloured in the telling as in the hearing by sympathy or dislike, by passion or by character. I doubt, while we should strive in history as in all things to be fair, if history can be written in that colourless way, to interest men in human doings. I am sure that nothing which lies further towards imaginative, creative Art can be written in that way.

It follows then that Literature, being by its nature personal, must be by its nature almost infinitely various. "Two persons cannot be the authors of the sounds which strike our ear; and as they cannot be speaking one and the same speech, neither can they be writing one and the same lecture or discourse." *Quot homines tot sententiae.* You may translate that, if you will, "Every man of us constructs his sentences differently"; and if there be indeed any quarrel between Literature and Science (as I never can see why there should be), I for one will readily grant Science all her cold superiority, her ease in Sion with universal facts, so it be mine to serve among the multifarious race who have to adjust, as best they may, Science's cold conclusions (and much else) to the brotherly give-and-take of human life.

Quicquid agunt homines, votum, timor, ira, voluptas. . . . Is it possible, Gentlemen, that you can have read one, two, three, or more of the acknowledged masterpieces of literature without having it borne in on you that they are great because they are alive, and traffic not with cold celestial certainties, but with men's hopes, aspirations, doubts, loves, hates, breakings of the heart;

the glory and vanity of human endeavour, the transience of beauty, the capricious uncertain lease on which you and I hold life, the dark coast to which we inevitably steer; all that amuses or vexes, all that gladdens, saddens, maddens us men and women on this brief and mutable traject which yet must be home for a while, the anchorage of our hearts? For an instance: —

> Here lies a most beautiful lady,
> Light of step and heart was she:
> I think she was the most beautiful lady
> That ever was in the West Country.
>
> But beauty vanishes, beauty passes,
> However rare, rare it be;
> And when I crumble who shall remember
> That lady of the West Country? [1]

Or take a critic — a literary critic — such as Samuel Johnson, of whom we are used to think as of a man artificial in phrase and pedantic in judgment. He lives, and why? Because, if you test his criticism, he never saw literature but as a part of life, nor would allow in literature what was false to life, as he saw it. He could be wrong-headed, perverse; could damn Milton because he hated Milton's politics; on any question of passion or prejudice could make injustice his daily food. But he could not, even in a friend's epitaph, let pass a phrase (however well turned) which struck him as empty of life or false to it. All Boswell testifies to this: and this is why Samuel Johnson survives.

Now let me carry this contention — that all Literature is personal and therefore various — into a field

[1] Walter de la Mare.

much exploited by the pedant, and fenced about with many notice-boards and public warnings. "*Neologisms not allowed here.*" "*All persons using slang, or trespassing in pursuit of originality. . . .*"

Well, I answer these notice-boards by saying that, literature being personal, and men various — and even the *Oxford English Dictionary* being no Canonical book — man's use or defiance of the dictionary depends for its justification on nothing but his success: adding that, since it takes all kinds to make a world, or a literature, his success will probably depend on the occasion. A few months ago I found myself seated at a bump-supper next to a cheerful youth who, towards the close, suggested thoughtfully, as I arose to make a speech, that, the bonfire (which of course he called the "bonner") being due at nine-thirty o'clock, there was little more than bare time left for "langers and godders." It cost me, who think slowly, some seconds to interpret that by "langers" he meant "Auld Lang Syne" and by "godders" "God Save the King." I thought at the time, and still think, and will maintain against any schoolmaster, that the neologisms of my young neighbour, though not to be recommended for essays or sermons, did admirably suit the time, place, and occasion.

Seeing that in human discourse, infinitely varied as it is, so much must ever depend on *who* speaks, and to *whom*, in what mood and upon what occasion; and seeing that Literature must needs take account of all manner of writers, audiences, moods, occasions, I hold it a sin against the light to put up a warning against any word that comes to us in the fair way of use and wont (as "wire," for instance, for a telegram), even as surely as we should warn off hybrids or deliberately pedantic

impostors, such as "antibody" and "picture-drome"; and that, generally, it is better to err on the side of liberty than on the side of the censor: since by the manumitting of new words we infuse new blood into a tongue of which (or we have learnt nothing from Shakespeare's audacity) our first pride should be that it is flexible, alive, capable of responding to new demands of man's untiring quest after knowledge and experience. Not because it was an ugly thing did I denounce Jargon to you, the other day: but because it was a dead thing, leading nowhither, meaning naught. There is *wickedness* in human speech, sometimes. You will detect it all the better for having ruled out what is *naughty*.

Let us err, then, if we err, on the side of liberty. I came, the other day, upon this passage in Mr. Frank Harris's study of "The Man Shakespeare": —

> In the last hundred years the language of Molière has grown fourfold; the slang of the studios and the gutter and the laboratory, of the engineering school and the dissecting table, has been ransacked for special terms to enrich and strengthen the language in order that it may deal easily with the new thoughts. French is now a superb instrument, while English is positively poorer than it was in the time of Shakespeare, thanks to the prudery of our illiterate middle class.[1]

Well, let us not lose our heads over this, any more than over other prophecies of our national decadence. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has not yet unfolded the last of its coils, which yet are ample enough to enfold us

[1] "An oration," says Quintilian, "may find room for almost any word saving a few indecent ones (*quae sunt parum verecunda*)." He adds that writers of the Old Comedy were often commended even for these: "but it is enough for us to mind our present business — *sed nobis nostrum opus intueri sat est.*" — *Author.*

in seven words for every three an active man can grapple with. Yet the warning has point, and a particular point, for those who aspire to write poetry: as Francis Thompson has noted in his Essay on Shelley: —

> Theoretically, of course, one ought always to try for the best word. But practically, the habit of excessive care in word-selection frequently results in loss of spontaneity; and, still worse, the habit of always taking the best word too easily becomes the habit of always taking the most ornate word, the word most removed from ordinary speech. In consequence of this, poetic diction has become latterly a kaleidoscope, and one's chief curiosity is as to the precise combinations into which the pieces will be shifted. There is, in fact, a certain band of words, the Praetorian cohorts of Poetry, whose prescriptive aid is invoked by every aspirant to the poetic purple. . . . Against these it is time some banner should be raised. . . . It is at any rate curious to note that the literary revolution against the despotic diction of Pope seems issuing, like political revolutions, in a despotism of his own making;

and he adds a note that this is the more surprising to him because so many Victorian poets were prose-writers as well.

> Now, according to our theory, the practice of prose should maintain fresh and comprehensive a poet's diction, should save him from falling into the hands of an exclusive coterie of poetic words. It should react upon his metrical vocabulary to its beneficial expansion, by taking him outside his aristocratic circle of language, and keeping him in touch with the great commonalty, the proletariat of speech. For it is with words as with men: constant intermarriage within the limits of a patrician clan begets effete refinement; and to reinvigorate the stock, its veins must be replenished from hardy plebeian blood.

In diction, then, let us acquire all the store we can, rejecting no coin for its minting but only if its metal be base. So shall we bring out of our treasuries new things and old.

Diction, however, is but a part of Style, and perhaps not the most important part. So I revert to the larger question, "What is Style? What its τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, its essence, the law of its being?"

Now, as I sat down to write this lecture, memory evoked a scene and with the scene a chance word of boyish slang, both of which may seem to you irrelevant until, or unless, I can make you feel how they hold for me the heart of the matter.

I once happened to be standing in a corner of a ball-room when there entered the most beautiful girl these eyes have ever seen or now — since they grow dull — ever will see. It was, I believe, her first ball, and by some freak or in some premonition she wore black: and not pearls — which, I am told, maidens are wont to wear on these occasions — but one crescent of diamonds in her black hair. *Et vera incessu patuit dea.* Here, I say, was absolute beauty. It startled.

> I think she was the most beautiful lady
> That ever was in the West Country.
> But beauty vanishes, beauty passes. . . .

She died a year or two later. She may have been too beautiful to live long. I have a thought that she may also have been too good.

For I saw her with the crowd about her: I saw led up and presented among others the man who was to be, for a few months, her husband: and then, as the men bowed, pencilling on their programmes, over their

shoulders I saw her eyes travel to an awkward young naval cadet (Do you remember Crossjay in Meredith's *The Egoist?* It was just such a boy) who sat abashed and glowering sulkily beside me on the far bench. Promptly with a laugh, she advanced, claimed him, and swept him off into the first waltz.

When it was over he came back, a trifle flushed, and I felicitated him; my remark (which I forget) being no doubt "just the sort of banality, you know, one does come out with" — as maybe that the British Navy kept its old knack of cutting out. But he looked at me almost in tears and blurted, "It isn't her beauty, sir. You saw? It's — it's — my God, it's the *style!* "

Now you may think that a somewhat cheap, or at any rate inadequate, cry of the heart in my young seaman; as you may think it inadequate in me, and moreover a trifle capricious, to assure you (as I do) that the first and last secret of a good Style consists in thinking with the heart as well as with the head.

But let us philosophise a little. You have been told, I daresay often enough, that the business of writing demands *two* — the author and the reader. Add to this what is equally obvious, that the obligation of courtesy rests first with the author, who invites the séance, and commonly charges for it. What follows, but that in speaking or writing we have an obligation to put ourselves into the hearer's or reader's place? It is *his* comfort, *his* convenience, we have to consult. To *express* ourselves is a very small part of the business: very small and almost unimportant as compared with *impressing* ourselves: the aim of the whole process being to persuade.

All reading demands an effort. The energy, the goodwill which a reader brings to the book is, and must be, partly expended in the labour of reading, marking, learning, inwardly digesting what the author means. The more difficulties, then, we authors obtrude on him by obscure or careless writing, the more we blunt the edge of his attention: so that if only in our own interest — though I had rather keep it on the ground of courtesy — we should study to anticipate his comfort.

But let me go a little deeper. You all know that a great part of Lessing's argument in his *Laokoön*, on the essentials of Literature as opposed to Pictorial Art or Sculpture, depends on this — that in Pictorial Art or in Sculpture the eye sees, the mind apprehends, the whole in a moment of time, with the correspondent disadvantage that this moment of time is fixed and stationary; whereas in writing, whether in prose or in verse, we can only produce our effect by a series of successive small impressions, dripping our meaning (so to speak) into the reader's mind — with the correspondent advantage, in point of vivacity, that our picture keeps moving all the while. Now obviously this throws a greater strain on his patience whom we address. Man at the best is a narrow-mouthed bottle. Through the conduit of speech he can utter — as you, my hearers, can receive — only one word at a time. In writing (as my old friend Professor Minto used to say) you are as a commander filing out his battalion through a narrow gate that allows only one man at a time to pass; and your reader, as he receives the troops, has to reform and reconstruct them. No matter how large or how involved the subject, it can be communicated only in that way. You see, then, what an obligation we owe to him of order and arrange-

ment; and why, apart from felicities and curiosities of diction, the old rhetoricians laid such stress upon order and arrangement as duties we owe to those who honour us with their attention. "*La clarté*," says a French writer, "*est la politesse.*" Χάρισι καὶ σαφηνείᾳ θῦε, recommends Lucian. Pay your sacrifice to the Graces, and to σαφήνεια — Clarity — first among the Graces.

What am I urging? "That Style in writing is much the same thing as good manners in other human intercourse?" Well, and why not? At all events we have reached a point where Buffon's often-quoted saying that "Style is the man himself" touches and coincides with William of Wykeham's old motto that "Manners makyth Man"; and before you condemn my doctrine as inadequate listen to this from Coventry Patmore, still bearing in mind that a writer's main object is to *impress* his thought or vision upon his hearer.

"There is nothing comparable *for moral force* to the charm of truly noble manners. . . ."

I grant you, to be sure, that the claim to possess a Style must be conceded to many writers — Carlyle is one — who take no care to put listeners at their ease, but rely rather on native force of genius to shock and astound. Nor will I grudge them your admiration. But I do say that, as more and more you grow to value truth and the modest grace of truth, it is less and less to such writers that you will turn: and I say even more confidently that the qualities of Style we allow them are not the qualities we should seek as a norm, for they one and all offend against Art's true maxim of avoiding excess.

And this brings me to the two great *paradoxes* of Style. For the first (1),— although Style is so curiously

personal and individual, and although men are so variously built that no two in the world carry away the same impressions from a show, there is always a norm somewhere; in literature and art, as in morality. Yes, even in man's most terrific, most potent inventions — when, for example, in *Hamlet* or *Lear* Shakespeare seems to be breaking up the solid earth under our feet — there is always some point and standard of sanity — a Kent or an Horatio — to which all enormities and passionate errors may be referred; to which the agitated mind of the spectator settles back as upon its centre of gravity, its pivot of repose.

(2) The second paradox, though it is equally true, you may find a little subtler. Yet it but applies to Art the simple truth of the Gospel, that he who would save his soul must first lose it. Though personality pervades Style and cannot be escaped, the first sin against Style as against good Manners is to obtrude or exploit personality. The very greatest work in Literature — the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Purgatorio*, *The Tempest*, *Paradise Lost*, the *Republic*, *Don Quixote* — is all

> Seraphically free
> From taint of personality.

And Flaubert, that gladiator among artists, held that, at its highest, literary art could be carried into pure science. "I believe," said he, "that great art is scientific and impersonal. You should by an intellectual effort transport yourself into characters, not draw *them* into *yourself*. That at least is the method." On the other hand, says Goethe, "We should endeavour to use words that correspond as closely as possible with what *we* feel, see, think, imagine, experience, and reason.

It is an endeavour we cannot evade and must daily renew." I call Flaubert's the better counsel, even though I have spent a part of this lecture in attempting to prove it impossible. It at least is noble, encouraging us to what is difficult. The shrewder Goethe encourages us to exploit ourselves to the top of our bent. I think Flaubert would have hit the mark if for "impersonal" he had substituted "disinterested."

For — believe me, Gentlemen — so far as Handel stands above Chopin, as Velasquez above Greuze, even so far stand the great masculine objective writers above all who appeal to you by parade of personality or private sentiment.

Mention of these great masculine "objective" writers brings me to my last word: which is, "Steep yourselves in *them:* habitually bring all to the test of *them:* for while you cannot escape the fate of all style, which is to be personal, the more of catholic manhood you inherit from those great loins the more you will assuredly beget."

This then is Style. As technically manifested in Literature it is the power to touch with ease, grace, precision, any note in the gamut of human thought or emotion.

But essentially it resembles good manners. It comes of endeavouring to understand others, of thinking for them rather than for yourself — of thinking, that is, with the heart as well as the head. It gives rather than receives; it is nobly careless of thanks or applause, not being fed by these but rather sustained and continually refreshed by an inward loyalty to the best. Yet, like "character" it has its altar within; to that retires for

counsel, from that fetches its illumination, to ray outwards. Cultivate, Gentlemen, that habit of withdrawing to be advised by the best. So, says Fénelon, "you will find yourself infinitely quieter, your words will be fewer and more effectual; and while you make less ado, what you do will be more profitable."

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